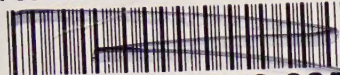


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A photograph of a young couple with blonde and brown hair, smiling and looking down at a large bouquet of pink and red peonies they are holding together. The woman is on the left, wearing a white sleeveless top, and the man is on the right, wearing a white button-down shirt. The background is a soft, warm-toned gradient.

# *Southern Charms*

A SOUTHERN BORN BOOKS ANTHOLOGY

KIM BOYKIN  
ERIKA MARKS  
BETH ALBRIGHT



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# Southern Charms

A SOUTHERN BORN BOOKS ANTHOLOGY

Kim Boykin

Erika Marks

Beth Albright



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**Bet the House**

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**Sweet Home Carolina**

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**The Perfect Score**

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# *Bet the House*

a magnolia bay romance

Erika Marks

# Dedication

To Jane Porter and Kim Boykin,  
for inviting me to your glorious party.

It's an honor and a joy.

Now let's dance!

**Dear Reader,**

Welcome to Magnolia Bay, South Carolina—a cozy, coastal town where sweet tea is chilled but hearts are always heating up!

Now I'm not much of a gambler, but I'm betting if you're here with me, it's because you enjoy a good love story as much as I do. My star-crossed lovers, however, are notorious gamblers—especially when it comes to betting against their unspoken feelings for one another.

Willa and Knox are my favorite kind of romantic couple—sassy, witty, feisty—and utterly irresistible; two people with sparks that are so strong, they burn everyone else in the room, but neither of them will admit it—that is, until life steps in and forces their hands (not to mention their hearts). As a writer and a hopeless romantic, I think that reckoning is the best part of every love story: the pivotal, oh-so-sexy-and-satisfying moment when that passion and connection can no longer be ignored—then, watch out!

And speaking of flames...better keep your fire extinguishers handy, because the Dunn sisters and the Loveless brothers are just getting warmed up. I have deliciously sexy plans in store for other members of their clans, so if you fall in love with Willa and Knox the way I did, I hope you'll come back to Magnolia Bay and find out what other romances await the residents of this charming Southern town in our continuing Carolina Born series.

So let's all find some shade under a sprawling live oak, kick off our flip-flops, raise our mint juleps, and toast to a new destination in romance...

*To Magnolia Bay!*

With my fondest wishes and warmest thanks,

Erika





# Chapter One

As she marched up the bungalow's uneven front steps, Willamena Dunn made a vow: No matter who stood on the other side of the cottage's peeling door, she would not lose her temper.

Yes, it had crushed her very soul to learn that another buyer had outbid her for the historic home she'd dreamed of owning since she was old enough to blink. Yes, she'd said unspeakable things about whoever had dared to steal it out from under her when she'd learned the awful news the day before. But no, her personal feelings didn't change her professional priorities.

No matter what, Willa wanted to ensure that the neglected house would finally get the restoration it deserved. As Staff Historian for Dunn-Right Preservation, her goal was to make sure the historic architecture of Magnolia Bay, South Carolina, was maintained and respected. Whoever had bought the nineteenth-century bungalow would have to understand the responsibility that came with owning a historic home in a landmarked district. And if they didn't, Willa would gladly—and firmly—enlighten them.

Her older sister, Connie, hadn't trusted Willa to carry out this introduction alone, too worried that she would let her passion for preservation override her professionalism. Willa had promised it would not.

She would be civil.

She would be courteous.

And, most importantly, she would *not* use foul language.

But that was before Willa stepped inside and saw the most infuriating man to ever hammer a nail in Magnolia Bay inspecting the crumbling green tile of the home's fireplace surround.

"Knox Loveless, what the *hell* are you doing here?"

So much for promises.

"Good morning to you, too." Knox stepped back from the fireplace and flashed Willa the same devilish grin he'd been flashing her nearly her whole life. At a little over six feet tall, blessed with hair that resembled poured

molasses and eyes to match, he was a hard man to ignore—though God knew Willa had been trying long enough. “Here to welcome me to the neighborhood?” he asked.

“*You* stole this place from me?”

“I didn’t steal anything,” he said, wiping his palms on his thighs. “I outbid you, fair and square.”

Oh, that was a laugh! There was nothing fair or square about the way Loveless Brothers Construction did business, trying to shoehorn new homes in among the town’s most cherished historic properties. Their lack of regard for Magnolia Bay’s architectural history was one of the main reasons Willa’s mother, Lily, had opened the doors of Dunn-Right Preservation thirty years ago. Now the firm was known up and down the coast for its soup-to-nuts services to historic home owners. From contracting repair and restoration professionals, to filling out applications for tax credits, there was nothing Dunn-Right couldn’t or wouldn’t do to promote the well-being of Magnolia Bay’s rich architectural history and charm.

If only they could add Putting arrogant building developers out of business to that list.

Knox pointed behind her. “Be a sweetheart, and hand me that tape beside you, will you, Meen?”

Willa bristled at the nickname. He’d coined it for her when they were teenagers, claiming it was short for Willamena but she’d never quite believed him, and she’d certainly never liked it—which, of course, explained why Knox still used it.

Willa shifted her glare to the measuring tape on the windowsill. She’d hand him the tape, all right. Hand it right to the side of his miserable, underhanded skull. From this distance, she could get some serious speed.

“Get it yourself,” she said.

“Now don’t frown,” Knox said, sauntering across the floor to retrieve his tape measure. “You always get that cute little line right there between your eyebrows when you frown and then you pull at it all day to smooth it out.” He reached toward Willa as if intending to plant his finger on the exact point.

She swatted his hand away. “You *do* know this building is in a protected district and that any alterations you make will have to be approved by—”

“The Historical Society Board,” he finished for her, returning to the window. “Yes, I know. I’m *on* the board, remember?”

“You so rarely make an appearance at the meetings, I forget.”

He stretched the tape across the sash. “Now that’s not fair. I was there just last week.”

“And doodling on your handout the whole time.”

He grinned at her over his shoulder. “So you *were* watching me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Willa crossed her arms tightly, hoping to squeeze herself hard enough to slow down her racing heart. She blamed its rapid beat on the shock of finding Knox there—and *not* on his dimpled smile. The fierce

topknot she'd secured of her wavy blond hair now wilted down one side of her head. She gave it an exasperated push to realign it. "Knox, there are plenty of old houses for sale in Magnolia Bay. Why did you have to take *this* one?"

"Because I like it." He squinted to read the measure.

"Since when?"

Knox let the tape snap back into its casing. "Since I dared you to break into it when you were fourteen and I was sixteen, which—if I remember—resulted in you needing five stitches in a very tender place." He looked at her thigh; Willa slapped her hand over the spot as if he could see through her jean shorts to the jagged scar underneath.

"It was *six* stitches," she said, turning away.

"Six. Right. You'd think I'd remember that, seeing as I was the one who took you to the emergency room."

As if she'd needed reminding. His rescue had been one of the greatest embarrassments of her life—made worse by the traitorous fluttering of her heart when he'd scooped her up in his arms and carried her the whole way to the clinic.

"Then you also remember how much this place means to me," she said.

"Which is exactly why I grabbed it before someone else did. When I saw Audrey, she told me she had three other bids in the running. And all significantly more than yours."

Was that true? Audrey had never let on.

Willa narrowed her eyes. "And what exactly do you plan to do with it?"

"I'm not sure. Speaking of plans..." Knox took a seat on the windowsill and leaned back, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "Got a date for the wedding yet?"

Leave it to him to bring up the only subject *more* sore than the fate of this house! After years of enduring a perfectly good grudge between her family and the insufferable Loveless brothers, her baby sister Peach had to go and fall in love with the oldest brother, Brady.

Willa had been willing to forgive the transgression in the beginning. After all, the Loveless brothers *were* notoriously good-looking and sexy and charming, and at twenty-five, Peach *was* still young enough not to know better.

But when Peach let it go too far and actually accepted Brady Loveless' marriage proposal earlier that spring, Willa's forgiving nature had flown out the window.

Now the dreaded nuptials were just a week away. Willa was still not sure how she was going to get through the ceremony without throwing up all over her dyed-apricot mules.

Willa looked up to find Knox studying her, waiting for her answer. She really wished he'd cut his damn hair already. He'd taken to letting it grow a little shaggy, just enough to indulge the most irresistible waves around his

ears.

"I hope your silence means you haven't found a date yet," he said, "and not because you can't recall the poor fella's name."

There was that smile again, wide enough now to bring out those impossible Loveless dimples.

She should have chucked the tape at him when she'd had the chance.

"If you must know," she said. "I'm still weighing my options."

It was a bald-faced lie but Willa didn't care. She wasn't about to admit to Knox Loveless that not only did she *not* have a date for her sister's wedding, but there wasn't a single prospect on the horizon, either.

It would have been an unbearable confession. They'd been sworn adversaries for too long to admit failure—even in romance. *Especially* in romance. Who knew when the rivalry had started? All that mattered was that it had endured. Every time life presented them with a common test, either professionally or personally, Willa invariably found herself competing with Knox Loveless. And with the exception of this building—a competition she wasn't aware she was in with him until a few minutes ago!—Willa never missed an opportunity to best him.

"Cutting it kind of close, aren't you, Meen? But then you're probably still smarting over that whole thing with Cord Watson, huh?"

"I am not *smarting*. As a matter of fact, I dumped *him*, thank you very much. So if anyone's still licking their wounds, it's Cord."

Another big fat lie. Even old Mr. McGinnis who sold blue crabs outside the marina knew Cord Watson had cut up Willa's heart into tiny pieces when it was revealed that he'd been cheating on her with Melissa Osborne. The humiliation had been excruciating. Willa had remained indoors, unbathed and braless and living on rum raisin ice cream for over a week until the cavalry (otherwise known as her three sisters ) had barged in and practically shoved a toothbrush into her mouth and a brush through her hair.

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm still undecided too." Knox tossed the tape between his hands like a football. He may have been the only one of his brothers to pursue swimming instead of Magnolia Bay's favorite team sport, but he still had the hands for it. "I think I've narrowed it down to Monica McCann or Katie Bryce. Of course, there's always Jenny Anderson..." He grinned. "I hear she has a thing for *groomsmen*."

"How lucky for you, then."

"Now don't be coy, Meen..." Knox wagged his finger at her as he pushed off the windowsill. "If you want me to add you to the list, just give the word."

"I'll give you two words: *hell* and *no*."

"Ouch." Knox snatched up a stack of papers off the mantle and shoved them under his arm. "Look, I've got to run, but I'll come by the office later to pick up a permit application."

"Now wait a minute..." Willa chased after him. "If you think I'm just going to let you take my precious building without a fight, Knox Loveless—"



"I'd be downright disappointed if you did." He stopped in the doorway and turned to flash her one last smile.

Willa wasn't even aware she was still frowning until Knox pointed suggestively between his eyebrows and grinned at her as he shut the door.



# Chapter Two

It was nothing short of a miracle that Willa made it to her parent's home without bursting into flames.

Usually a drive through Magnolia Bay's quaint downtown was an undisputed cure-all. Main Street with the familiar shops and restaurants she'd grown up around was always there to soothe her like a group of old friends gathering around a pot of coffee. Hoping to calm herself, she'd even taken the long way, riding along the gentle curve of Bayshore Drive where the town's oldest and grandest homes looked out onto the bay and the Atlantic beyond, sure that the tangy fragrance of the water would quiet her rage.

No luck.

When Willa arrived at the lovingly restored Queen Anne cottage, she forced herself to slow her angry march as she mounted the porch steps. She even took a few extra minutes to soak up the fragrance of the bursting gardenia bushes that flanked the front of her parents' home like piped frosting. But even the sugary smell of the blooms couldn't sweeten her mood.

Finding her little sister Peach in the kitchen with their father didn't help matters, either. Even though Peach had a good job as a personal shopper in Magnolia Bay's most upscale boutique Aquamarine, she had never moved out of their parents' home. Willa couldn't understand it.

Hugh Dunn scanned the paper, his thick white hair still wild from sleep. "Good news—weatherman says today's gonna be a ten."

"Then he's a damn liar!" Willa flounced into a free chair at the breakfast table. A box of doughnuts sat open; she picked out a jelly and took an angry bite.

"Better get the whip and chair, Daddy," said Peach, lifting her coffee. "The ferocious lion's in the house."

Willa narrowed her eyes. "I'm not talking to you, *traitor*."

"Oh Lord. You *are* gonna cut out all this foolishness before the wedding,

aren't you? I mean, *really*, Will. I thought *I* was supposed to be the baby in this family."

"Don't you realize the hypocrisy of the name you're taking?" Willa said. "You'll be Peach Loveless, for God's sake. I mean, think about it: you'll be in a *loveless* marriage!"

"Daddy, make her stop it."

"Girls, please," Hugh groaned, snapping his paper to a new page. "Show your old man a little mercy, will you? I'm still on my first cup of coffee here."

"Oh my Lord—your *nails*!" Peach cried, her eyes huge. "You promised you'd stop biting them for the wedding. They're a mess!"

"They're fine," Willa said, lowering her hands to her lap, out of sight.

"They look like you tried to open a can of beans with them. I'm scheduling you for a mani/pedi."

"Over my dead body."

"If that's what it takes. Oh, and don't forget your final fitting at Teeny's is coming up."

"What's to fit?" said Willa. "It's a dress. If it's a six, it fits. And if it's too long, well, that's what they made duct tape for."

"Willamena Margery Dunne," Peach said, enunciating each syllable, her perfect, heart-shaped mouth tightening with fury. "You hem that bridesmaid dress with duct tape and I will murder you!"

"Oh calm yourself, Scarlet. I'll get to the damn store. Anything else?"

"Yes, as a matter of a fact, Brady has asked me to speak to you about your language."

"He what?"

"You heard me. So help me, if you cuss in the middle of my wedding to the most wonderful man on earth—"

"Good grief, y'all! I could hear the squawking from the driveway."

Thirty-one year-old Constance Dunn entered the kitchen and joined her sisters and father at the table. She swung her long chestnut ponytail over her shoulder and reached for a glazed doughnut.

"Well, don't blame me," said Peach, glaring at Willa. "I'm just a bride-to-be who dared to think she might have the support of her sister on the most special day of her life."

"I do support you," said Willa. "That's the whole point! I'm trying to stop you from entering into a life of misery and tedium and McMansions."

"My head is killing me. I'm going upstairs." Peach rose and marched through the kitchen doorway.

Hugh lowered his paper to deliver Willa a chastising stare, not unlike the one he'd given her when she'd been eight and "remodeled" Peach's Princess Dollhouse.

Willa balked. "What? It's true! How much imagination does it take to put up pre-fab houses?"

"Now be fair, young lady," Hugh said. "You know Davis Loveless built the



Lowry house, which has received countless accolades over the years for its innovative design.”

Willa rolled her eyes. “Okay, so they built one original house.”

“Will, you really need to let this go,” Connie said, licking glaze from her thumb. “Peach is happy. That’s all that matters.”

“I just can’t believe after all the times they fought to tear down the same buildings you and Mom and all of us try to save, Peach sides with the enemy. Just think how that’s going to look.”

Hugh Dunn folded his paper. “People with different views marry all the time, Willa.”

“Liking different kinds of music is one thing, Daddy. The Loveless family makes its money destroying everything our family tries to protect. That’s hardly a different view.”

“She’s marrying him, Will,” said Connie. “Deal with it.”

Willa sighed, curbing her tirade. Anyway, they had bigger problems this morning than their sister marrying Brady Loveless. “We’ve got to get to the office.” She stuffed the last bite of doughnut into her mouth and clapped powdered sugar off her hands. She rose and steered Connie toward the door. “Bye, Daddy—Bye, Judas!”

“I heard that!” yelled Peach from upstairs.

\* \* \*

“Good Lord, Will, what’s the rush?” Connie followed Willa out the front door and down the porch to her car. “I’m still eating.”

“You eat, I’ll drive.” Willa scooted into her beloved mustard-yellow VW bug.

Connie climbed into the passenger seat and buckled up. “What’s this all about?”

Willa flexed her fingers over the wheel and let out a deep breath. “Knox Loveless bought my bungalow.”

“What?” Connie stopped chewing, a wad of doughnut pushed against her cheek. She swallowed the lump. “Why would in the world would Knox buy that house?”

“That’s what I want to know.” Willa glared at the bumper of the convertible in front of her. “I am so sick of those boys getting everything they want. Including our sister.”

“Oh, come on.” Connie smiled. “You do have to admit Peach and Brady make a cute couple.”

“Peach would make a wildebeest look cute.”

“We should all have such problems.”

Willa glanced at her sister’s profile, a rush of love and sympathy filling her. “If it makes you feel any better, sweetie, I still don’t have a date for this damn wedding, either.”

“Yeah, but you’re not going to be seeing your ex-boyfriend there with his beautiful new girlfriend.”

"Pammy Johnson is not beautiful."

"Are you kidding, Will? She's unnaturally gorgeous."

"Keyword: Unnaturally. She's had more things plumped and filled than a mattress showroom. Come on, Con. Who wants that?"

Connie sighed. "Elliott."

Elliott Grant, a roofing contractor Connie had lived with up until four months ago, had seemed like the perfect man—until he'd requested space, which Connie learned two weeks later was code for the chance to date newly divorced Pammy Johnson. For the first time in her life, Willa had given serious thought to hiring a hit man.

"Why don't you ask Chuck Giles to go with you?" Willa suggested.

"I think the commute from Chicago might be kind of a deal-breaker."

"Chuck's in Chicago?"

"Since February."

"Oh." Willa frowned. "What about Patrick Morrison?"

"You already suggested Patrick, remember? And I told you he'd just gotten engaged. Honestly, Will. You need to keep up. Stop being stubborn and join Facebook already like the rest of humanity."

"Why am I being stubborn because I don't want to scroll through pictures of high school friends' children's hamsters?"

Francis Marion Way opened up to reveal Magnolia Bay's picturesque downtown. Main Street bustled, the quaint shops and restaurants that flanked it enjoying the increased traffic of the summer season.

They pulled in to Dunn-Right Preservation's small gravel lot and entered the back of the squat brick building, catching the warm, nutty smell of fresh bread from Hart's Bakery next door. When Lily and Hugh Dunn had purchased the storefront thirty years earlier, it had been a travel agency. They'd made quick work of exposing the hidden treasures the previous owners had boarded up, ripping away wood paneling to show off brick walls, tearing out dropped ceilings to reveal the old tin tiles, and refinishing the floors to gleaming amber. Willa never tired of stepping inside the space and settling in to her desk, an old schoolhouse version her parents had rescued and Willa herself had painstakingly restored.

The sisters had just sat down, their computers barely warm, then a knock sounded.

Connie squinted toward the entryway. "Were you expecting Knox?"

Willa froze. *Crap*. He'd come for the application, as promised.

"I'll let him in." Connie stood up.

Willa grabbed her hand. "Don't answer it. We're not here."

"What do you mean, we're not here? For God's sake, Will, he can see us!"

Sure enough Willa looked over to find Knox Loveless' hands cupped around his face and peering into the front door. "Fine." Willa joined Connie, already on her way to let in Knox. "But we're not making him coffee."

Connie reached the entrance, flipped the deadbolt, and pulled the door

open to reveal Knox and a second man in his early thirties, blond with eyes the same shade of pale blue as his polo shirt.

"Good morning, ladies," said Knox, stepping inside the sunlit entryway. His companion followed. "I'd like to introduce y'all to Jay Preston. Jay's relocating from Atlanta and we're building him a little place over in Magnolia Run."

Willa nearly laughed out loud. There was no such thing as a "little place" in Magnolia Bay's newest housing development. Those homes in Magnolia Run were strictly of the McMansion order and Knox knew it.

"Jay's only been in town a few weeks, so I thought it was about time I introduce him to Magnolia Bay's best-looking preservationists."

Oh, he was laying it on thick all right, Willa thought. She used every bit of self-control not to frown and deepen the line between her eyes, remembering Knox's earlier teasing.

Connie, however, lit up like a Christmas tree. "Welcome to Magnolia Bay, Jay. I hope you'll love our little town as much as we do."

"Knox tells me y'all have done some amazing work keeping Magnolia Bay's oldest buildings intact," Jay said.

"You can see all our efforts for yourself." Connie gestured around to the newspaper articles and before-and-after photos of some of their most successful restoration projects that covered the office's exposed brick walls.

"Maybe while Willa gets me the permit application, Connie could give you a quick tour, Jay," Knox said.

Connie smiled. "I'd be glad to. I was actually about to make a pot of coffee. Would y'all like some?"

"I know I would," Knox said.

Jay nodded. "Please."

Willa glared at Connie. They'd agreed—no coffee! But her sister was already on her way to the back of the office with Jay, pointing at photos as they walked. Connie had even taken off her glasses which she only ever did in the company of a cute guy.

What the hell had gotten into her?

Knox stepped forward, blocking Willa's view. "I really appreciate you helping me out with this, Meen."

"I'm not doing this for you—I'm doing it for the house." She pushed past him for her desk. "You do know all these forms are online now so you could have saved yourself the trip, right?"

Knox took a seat on the edge of the cluttered surface. "And deny you another chance to shower me with affection?"

"Move," she ordered, coming around to where he sat.

He rose and Willa flipped through the stack he'd been covering, finding the folder of blank applications halfway in and plucking one out. "I still fail to see why you need a permit application when you don't know what you plan to do with the place yet."

He grinned. "Maybe I just like to be prepared, Meen."

She handed the papers to him. "You'll have to be more than that to get my Aunts to approve that application when you bring it to the Board."

With her Aunts, Camellia and Daisy Bloom, wielding the power of Magnolia Bay's Historical Society—and two precious votes on the Board—the Loveless men had never had much luck getting their work permits approved on historic building projects.

It was a well-known fact in Magnolia Bay that dimples and charm didn't sway the Bloom Bitches.

"Any tips to winning their votes?" Knox asked.

"Camellia likes white chocolate and Daisy loves champagne."

"Good to know," he said, sliding the application into his back pocket.

Willie tuned to hide her grin. Not only did Aunt Camellia despise white chocolate but it was the gift her husband Don had always given her when he'd screwed up, which was often. As for Aunt Daisy, she'd been a staunch teetotaler her whole life. Knox might as well take a match to his permit then and there.

Laughter sailed out from the back room. Willie looked toward the sound, trying to recall the last time she'd heard her sister that amused.

"Sounds like Connie and Jay are really hitting it off, doesn't it?" asked Knox.

"She's just being polite," said Willie. "He's not her type."

Another burst of laughter, this one longer.

"Not her type, huh?" Knox chuckled. "She have a date for the wedding yet, or is she *weighing her options* too?"

Willie would ignore that.

"I have no idea," she lied, picking up a catalog of historic light fixtures and thumbing through it.

"I bet Jay's free."

"Believe me, you don't know the first thing about what my sister looks for in a man."

"Care to wager on it?"

"Excuse me?" Willie slapped the catalog closed.

Knox set his palms on the desk and leaned in, close enough that Willie could smell the warm spice of soap on his skin.

His voice dropped. "I bet I can find a date for your sister to the wedding before you can."

"That's ridiculous."

"If it's so ridiculous, why not take the bet?"

"What's the prize?"

"The bungalow."

"What?" Willie blinked at him and met the flicker of challenge in his deep brown eyes.

Knox grinned. "If Connie goes with my guy, I keep the bungalow. If she



picks yours, you get it.”

“You’re not serious?” Willa kept her eyes leveled with Knox’s, waiting for them to shift and reveal the joke, but they remained unwavering. “You’d give the house to me if I win? Just like that?”

Knox nodded. “Just like that.”

Willa glanced past him to the doorway of the office’s small kitchen.

“Come on, Meen,” he whispered. “What do you have to lose?”

Her pride, for starters. Oh, and there was the chance that Connie might never speak to her again if she found out her trusted sister had bartered her love life for an old building.

Still...

Connie would understand she’d done it for the greater good...*right?*

Willa let out a surrendering breath. Who was she kidding? She’d been making bets with Knox Loveless almost as long as she’d been chewing down her nails when she was nervous. Some wagers she’d lost, some she’d won, but all of them she’d been helpless to resist.

“Okay, deal.”

“Shake on it.” Knox stuck out his hand.

She slid her fingers into his wide palm and he gave her hand a firm squeeze.

“Maybe I should have set down some terms first,” he said.

“Too late.” She glanced down at their linked fingers. “Are you going to let go of my hand?”

“Why? Afraid we might start something?”

“Hardly.”

Still, Willa felt a patch of heat bloom on each cheek at the suggestion and tugged her hand free just in time to watch Jay and Connie emerge from the back room, holding cups of coffee and wearing two of the most euphoric smiles Willa had ever seen.



# Chapter Three

Mark and Julie Michaels had been living in their custom-built home in Magnolia Run for over a year, but no one would ever believe it.

Knox certainly couldn't. As he and Justin steered one of the company's trucks down the driveway, Knox surveyed the site. The lawn, perfectly landscaped and manicured, showed no signs of wear. The enormous wrap-around porch, flanked by windmill palms, bore a tidy assortment of outdoor seating that looked as if it had never seen an actual seat.

He and Justin had come to check the punch list on the home's latest addition—a media room—but when Justin swung the truck around the cement turnaround, Knox saw the convertible parked under the house and a knot of dread fisted in his stomach. There were several white convertibles in Magnolia Bay, but only one with the license plate: DECOR8.

Knox glanced at Justin. "What's Jenny Anderson's car doing here?"

"She's meeting us."

"What for?"

"What do you mean, what for? She's the Michaels' decorator."

"Since when?"

"Since the beginning." Justin turned off the engine and turned to face him. "Jesus, Knox, it's been in all the correspondence about this job. Don't you ever read your emails?"

Sure he did...*eventually*. Sue him, but he hated email, hated computers, and he *really* hated smartphones. He wasn't one of those guys constantly on his cell, like his brothers.

"Is there a problem with her being here?" Justin asked.

"No," Knox said, deciding there wasn't enough time to explain—and sure his younger brother wouldn't have much sympathy for his plight even if he did. The last time Knox had seen Jenny Anderson was when he'd run into her at Crusoe's, a little white-tablecloth bistro beside the marina. She'd come on

strong and Knox had promised to take her to the new Italian place that had opened on Isle of Palms, Coda Del Pesce.

"There she is." Justin nodded toward the house where Jenny stood at the edge of the porch in a short, pink dress that showed off her long, tanned legs. Her straight blond hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail.

She waved at them with a quick wiggle of her fingers, her silver cuff bracelet catching the sun. Her smile was high and wide. Maybe she wouldn't remember his broken promise, Knox thought as he climbed out of the truck. He could hope.

"This is a surprise, gentlemen," Jenny said. "I was expecting Brady."

"He had to take Peach to Teeny's for her final dress fitting," Justin said. "I hope you don't mind the change in plans."

"Not at all. It's always nice running in to old friends..." Jenny swept off her sunglasses and rested her gaze on Knox. "Especially old friends who still owe me dinner."

Shit. So much for his theory.

Knox glanced at his brother, hoping to signal a need for rescue. Justin understood and obliged. "Shall we go in?" he asked, stepping back to allow Jenny entrance first.

Inside the expansive foyer, Knox glanced around. He and his brothers may have built this house, but he'd never liked it. It wasn't that he minded the modern look—he liked contemporary designs—it was that the homeowners had no interest in making the place feel like a home. When he, Brady, and Justin had met with the Michaels to help them decide on a floor plan, the newlyweds had chosen one as if deciding on take-out. Knox appreciated the convenience of à la carte house plans, but man! Surely a homeowner wanted for *some* personal touches?

The lack of interest wasn't uncommon in their field. Most of the homes Loveless Brothers Construction built were for part-timers who wanted a place to entertain and impress—especially now that they were helping to build Arcadia Dune's new condo village.

Still, it always broke Knox's heart a little to see so much money and energy spent on a place that looked entirely unwelcoming. Growing up, their mother had worked hard to make their enormous house on Bayshore Drive feel homey and lived-in, which was never hard to do with three wild boys living in it.

Knox understood why Willa was so passionate about historic architecture. There was character in old bones, a patina of history in wood floors that you couldn't replicate, no matter how much money you sunk into a place.

Still, his father and their Uncle Teddy had worked hard to make Loveless Brothers Construction the thriving business it was today and Knox wasn't ungrateful. Ambivalent some days, maybe even downright conflicted, but never ungrateful.

"This way, gentlemen." Jenny led them down the hall to the basement

door, the high, tapered heels of her wedge sandals echoing with every step. Downstairs, the air noticeably cooler and cloying with the smell of new carpet and fresh paint, she flipped on a row of switches, bathing the large room in recessed light.

“Bet they’ll have one heck of a Super Bowl party down here,” Justin said, moving to check the seats.

Forget the party, Knox thought. Under this soft, cozy lighting, all he wanted to do was slide into an upholstered chair, lean back, and take a nap.

Jenny joined them as they toured the room, checking off the last of the job’s unfinished items on the punch list.

Their survey nearly complete, a cell chimed with an incoming call. Justin looked at his screen and announced to Knox: “It’s Bud Warren. I should take this.”

When Justin had disappeared up the stairs, Jenny closed her tablet and set it on the built-in sideboard.

“So about that dinner...” Her lips danced toward a smile but her blue eyes flashed with challenge.

“I didn’t forget,” said Knox.

“Could have fooled me.”

When Knox didn’t move to close the gap of floor space between them, Jenny did.

“Never mind Coda Del Pesce,” she said. “Let’s go into Charleston to The Ordinary. I hear the wait list for reservations is over a month now.” She looked up at him, her gaze traveling his face slowly, indulgently, welcoming him to do the same to hers.

Knox could smell her perfume, a heavy, citrusy scent that had been overwhelmed by the room’s lingering construction odors. This close, it was unmistakable.

“A month, huh?”

Jenny nodded. “So you better hurry up and ask me, Knox.”

He guessed he’d better. So why hadn’t he?

Justin came down the stairs. “Bud asked if we could move the meeting up a half hour.”

Caught, Jenny took a step back from Knox and cleared her throat. “Then we should get y’all on your way.” She snatched up her tablet and pressed it to her chest, restoring her best let’s-get-down-to-business pose. Knox watched her resume her tour of the room and had the strangest sense of relief although he had no idea why. Since when was Jenny Anderson’s interest something to be avoided?

He was still wondering the same thing when they parted ways with her in the driveway a few minutes later, a bottle of beer he’d snuck from the Michaels’ fridge lodged in his pocket.

Back in the truck, Justin’s gaze was condemning as he started the engine.

“You do realize Brady would kick your ass if he knew you took that.”

"If they actually had decent beer, I would have taken more," said Knox, tugging out the hem of his shirt and twisting off the cap. "Want a sip?"

Justin scowled. "Don't you make me an accomplice to your crime."

Knox grinned as he took a long, cold swig. He loved the crap out of his little brother but man, the kid needed to lighten up. He was almost as rigid as Brady when it came to business. Most days Knox felt like the court jester trying to amuse two grumpy kings.

Knox recalled his run-in with Willa that morning, her similar stone-faced response to his attempts at humor. She and Justin would have made a perfect pair; both wound up tighter than a pair of springs, both so easily ruffled. Knox might have suggested the coupling if a part of him—a part he would never have admitted to another living soul, mind you—didn't flare up with jealousy at the thought of some guy, even his own brother, romancing Willa Dunn.

It didn't make a lick of sense. On the one hand, Willa could drive him crazy with her impossible standards for new construction and her unwillingness to bend on even the smallest issue. On the other, he admired her loyalty, and her commitment and passion for her work. Sometimes he would even find himself watching her when she was in the room, find himself thinking the damndest things about the way her eyes turned up at the ends, or the way her hair spilled out of her ponytail, despite her constant attempts to contain it.

They'd known each other a long time, probably too long to get past all their history, and yet he looked forward to seeing her as if he'd only just met her. He claimed she was as familiar as a sister—but that wasn't true. After the summer of his nineteenth year and her seventeenth, when she'd come back to Magnolia Bay after being gone two months in California and returned looking nothing like the pale-skinned tomboy she'd been when she left, Knox never thought of her as sister material again.

A fact which, frankly, annoyed the hell out of him most days. Trying not to notice how attractive she was had been a whole lot easier when he hadn't *had* to try.

But it was more than that. Willa Dunn was different. While most every girl in town rushed to the Sassy Scissors on Main Street to have their long locks colored and blown and styled, Willa had always insisted on keeping her curly blond hair twisted into a knot or cuffed in a messy ponytail.

But most of all, Willa was *smart*. Smart enough to keep up with him, to say nothing of keep him on his toes. Knox liked that, liked the way she didn't let him get away with things, didn't let him off the hook the way so many women did.

Women like Jenny Anderson.

"Sorry if I broke up the party back there," Justin said, steering them onto the main road.

"You didn't break up anything. Jenny and I were just talking."



"Talking, my ass. She looked like she wanted to peel off your shirt with her teeth, you lucky dog."

"You're dreaming."

Justin chuckled and shook his head. "Dad's right."

"About what?"

"He thinks you'll never settle down."

"He said that?"

"Pretty much."

Knox shrugged and took a swig of beer. "I'm thirty-one. What's the rush? Anyway..." He smiled at Justin. "Not of all of us want to marry the first girl we make out with."

"Speaking of Nicole..." Justin kept his eyes on the road but his lips shifted toward a telling smile. "I bought the ring."

"You what?" Knox reached out to mess up Justin's tidy blond hair. "You sly dog!"

"Hey, cut it out; I'm trying to drive here." Justin shoved him off with one hand. "And no one else knows. I haven't even asked her Dad yet so don't say anything to anyone. Besides, I'm gonna wait until after the wedding. I don't want to steal any of Brady's thunder."

"I'd be more worried about *Peach's* thunder."

"I thought I'd surprise Nic with an overnight at the Dunes and ask her there. Get one of those really huge rooms that overlook the water. Think she'd like that?"

"Are you kidding? Oh and speaking of windows, don't throw out those windows we salvaged from the Madison job, okay? I might need them for the bungalow."

"Is this all because of Willa?"

"Is *what* all because of Willa?"

"That house. Is that why you bought it? To piss her off? Cause F-Y-I, bro, you've already done that in spades. I have a feeling you could give her one of your kidneys and she'd still stick pins in your voodoo doll."

Knox slouched down in the seat and rested his foot against the dash. "Well, that would explain this headache I can't kick."

"So is it?"

"No, I just like the place, that's all. I always have."

"Uh-huh."

"Watch the road, will you?" Knox was eager to change the subject. "Or we'll be a hell of a lot more than late."

\* \* \*

Peach Dunn lifted her hand to her forehead and sighed.

All day she had been convinced that she had a fever. Now that she had arrived at Teeny's Bridal for her fitting, she swore she felt warmer than normal.

Beside her in the driver's seat, Brady Loveless fiddled with his tie and raked

both hands through his black hair to neaten it one last time.

Peach turned to her fiancé. "Sweetie, feel my forehead. Do I feel hot to you?"

Brady gave her a slow grin. "Baby, you *always* feel hot to me."

"I'm serious. I think I'm getting sick. All this wedding stuff and meetings with the florists and decorators and Willa fussin' at me every five minutes, I swear the stress is making me truly ill."

"Aw, baby, I'm sorry." Brady's teasing smile slid away, his sparkling blue eyes flashing with tenderness.

She dropped her head against the seat. "I had a dream last night that we didn't have enough cake and everybody yelled at me and walked out before they could pronounce us husband and wife. Is that the craziest thing you've ever heard? I mean, who really gives a hoot about the cake anyway, right?"

"It's not too late, you know. We could still elope..."

Peach stared at him. Was he trying to make her feel better or send her to the hospital that instant?

"...or *not*," Brady added with a sheepish shrug. "It was just a suggestion, baby."

Lord help her, she did love him. From the first time she'd laid eyes on him when she was just ten and he was seventeen and tossing a football with his brothers during the Blue Crab Festival. His wavy black hair and eyes as blue-green as the bay in summer; they'd make the most beautiful babies the world had ever seen. That day she'd told her best friend Angela that she'd grow up to marry Brady Loveless and Angela had laughed so hard that lemonade had come out of her nose.

Now, in just a few days, she was going to become Mrs. Brady Loveless—and Angela was in her bridal party.

"We should go in," said Brady, gesturing to the store's petal-pink door. "We're already ten minutes late."

The interior of Teeny's always reminded Peach of one of the fancy pastries her parents used to let her and her sisters pick out from The Village Bakery at Christmastime. Everything in Teeny's shop looked edible. Skirts and crinolines as frothy as meringues, rhinestone-studded veils that sparkled like they'd been dusted with sugar. Peach had often wondered why Teeny Marshall hadn't gone into desserts instead of dresses.

Brady leaned in and whispered, "Why do I feel like I just fell into a wedding cake?"

"Because you did," Peach whispered back just as Teeny Marshall pushed through a lace curtain that veiled the back office, hands clasped under her chin, bleached-blond hair teased into a high peak. Teeny had acquired her nickname when she'd been a toddler, so petite compared to her four older brothers. Over the years, Teeny's petite frame had expanded—generously—but the nickname had remained. To Peach, she was like a big dollop of whipped cream: fluffy, soft, and always sweet-smelling.

"There's our blushing bride-to-be!" Teeny squealed, rushing at Peach with arms spread. After doling out a hug and a pair of air kisses, Teeny stepped back, hands set on her ample hips, and gave Brady a look that could slow a pack of starved wolves. "Brady Loveless, what are you doing here?"

"Just came for some moral support is all, Mrs. Marshall."

"Fine, so long as you keep your moral support *blindfolded*." Teeny raised one penciled eyebrow. "You know the groom can't see the bride in her dress till the big day."

"Yes, ma'am, I know."

"Then you best keep your distance." Teeny gestured to the back of the shop. "You can wait with Polly. I'll have her fix you a nice glass of sweet tea."

"I'd rather a beer," Brady muttered.

Peach poked his arm. Teeny blinked back at him. "What was that now, sugar?"

"I said, Polly's a *dear*."

Peach buried a giggle in Brady's sleeve as they followed Teeny through a cloud of illusion. "Brady, honey, you go that way," Teeny pointed him down a short hall while she steered Peach in the opposite direction. "Peach, your dress is already waiting for you. Why don't you get dressed, sugar, and I'll be back to check on you in a few minutes?"

Peach nodded, exchanged a quick smile with Brady and then walked down to the dressing room. A garment bag hung beside the mirror, its plastic seams bursting with the bulk of her dress. She reached up to draw down the zipper then stopped, frozen with panic. What if she hated it? What if after everything it made her look terrible? What if it pinched her ribs or squeezed her arms? She'd been in such a state when she'd chosen it, undone after months of visiting bridal salons and websites. So many choices. A-line or strapless, mermaid or Empire, ivory or cream, train or no train—her head had spun! All her life, she'd dreamed of weddings and pored over pictures of dresses but when the time had finally come, she'd just wanted the decision made *for* her! Exhausted, she'd narrowed her choices down to four dresses, numbered four pieces of paper, tossed them in a bowl, slugged a shot of her Daddy's whiskey and picked one.

Now it was real.

"Here goes everything," she whispered as she undressed down to her bra and underwear. She was about to tug down the bag's zipper when she felt the door give behind her.

She spun around to see Brady slipping in. "Baby! What are you doing? You can't be in here!"

"Who says?" he whispered, shutting the door behind him.

"You heard Teeny. It's a rule. You can't see me in my wedding dress until the wedding."

"Yeah, but you're not *in* your dress," he said, nodding to the garment bag then to her barely-clothed body, his eyes flashing with a familiar desire.

And just like a flipped switch, Peach felt all the blood rush to her middle.

Brady moved toward her, his smile intent on trouble.

"Baby, stop..." She held up her hands to protest, but she was already a goner. "They'll wonder where you are."

"I told them I had to get something from the truck." He nuzzled her neck, his fingers peeling back the satiny cups of her bra.

"Baby, are you crazy?" Peach whispered harshly, trying to push his hands down. "Teeny and Polly are right in the other room!"

"They're blasting Kenny Rogers back there. They can't hear a thing. What can I say? Changing rooms get me hot..."

Peach closed her eyes and whispered, "Brady Loveless, *dentist offices* get you hot."

"Guilty as charged..." Her breasts freed, Brady scooped them into his hands and began teasing the tips until she squirmed.

"Baby...we can't..." Peach raked her fingers through his hair, biting her lip to quiet a moan.

Brady slid his hands around to cup her ass, sliding his thumbs under the lace edge of her panties and running them up and down. "Still thinking about cake?" he whispered, his voice deepening as he lowered his head and took one puckered nipple into his mouth.

Peach threw her head back and knocked a small frame off its nail on the other side of the wall.

"Peach, honey?" Teeny's voice broke through the thrum of their quick breathing. "Sugar, you okay in there?"

Peach froze. "Um—fine. Just fine!"

"I don't know where Brady got off to," Teeny yelled back.

"Tell her Brady got off in here," he whispered as he lifted Peach and settled her legs around his waist.

Teeny called again. "How's everything fitting, sugar?"

"Everything fits just—" Peach stopped, feeling the warm and familiar thickness of him slide in. "It fits...oh, it fits just *fuuuine*."

\* \* \*

Willa was halfway through a bowl of creamy She-Crab Soup before she felt the first pangs of regret.

When would she ever learn! Wagers with Knox Loveless were like movie popcorn. She'd swear over and over she wouldn't start, but all it took was one piece, one damned kernel, and before she knew it, her fingertips were caked in powdered butter and her stomach hurt.

She looked out at the marina and frowned as she chewed a piece of sweet crabmeat. Who did she hope to throw in the ring? She'd already exhausted her meager list of possibilities for datable men for Connie and come up empty. Magnolia Bay may have been a charming and romantic seaside town, but that didn't mean eligible men walked out of the water every day at noon.

*Thea*—of course! Her oldest sister knew plenty of single men at the law



firm. Sure, they were all a bit uptight for Willa's tastes, and probably for Connie's too, but her sister didn't have to *marry* the guy; Connie just had to agree to go to the wedding with him.

How hard could that be?

Her sister picked up on the third ring.

"What's wrong?"

Willa frowned. "Why does something have to be wrong?"

"Because Dennis is on the other line and if nothing's wrong then I'm hanging up."

Dennis Connolly was Thea's boyfriend; a fellow attorney at the same firm who, after three years, had yet to pop the question. Thea assured them all his proposal would come any day. Willa would believe it when she saw the ring.

"I need a favor, Thee."

"This isn't a good time, Will. Call me later."

"It's an emergency."

Thea sighed. "The last time you said that I was picking you up in Edisto at two in the morning."

"I need you to help me find a date for Connie for the wedding."

"How is that an emergency?"

"How would you like to go date-less to your sister's wedding?"

"I *am* going date-less."

"That's only because Dennis will be out of town," Willa said. "That's not the same thing as showing up alone while your ex-boyfriend is there with his new girlfriend. It's humiliating, Thee. We're Connie's sisters; we have to help her stick it to the creep."

"This isn't high school, Will. My days of toilet-papering lockers are over."

"You did that?"

"To Mason Webb, junior year. Actually, it was fly paper."

Willa smiled. "Fly paper. Genius."

"Yeah, well. He's lucky I didn't line his gym shorts with it first."

"Come on, Thee. Isn't there *anyone* there you can think of?"

"I'm sure if I mention the open bar, I'll get plenty of takers."

"Well, here's the thing. It can't be like a blind date who just shows up at the ceremony. It has to be someone Connie can meet and get to know. She has to *choose* him. And we don't have a lot of time."

The line went quiet.

"*Wuill...*" Thea said. "What have you done?"

"I haven't *done* anything. It's just that I made this little bet with Knox Loveless and now I'm—"

"Oh, Lord..."

"It's not like that, Thee. You know the bungalow on Compton Avenue? The house I've been deeply and madly in love with for my whole life?"

"You are such a drama queen." Thea sighed. "Yes, of course I know it."

"Well, Knox outbid me and somehow duped Audrey Edmunds into selling

it to him *but* if I can find Connie a date for the wedding before he can, then he swears he'll hand the deed over to Dunn-Right." Willa paused, waiting for her sister's response, but the line remained silent. "Thee? Are you still there?"

A trilling laugh burst through the quiet.

Willa frowned down at her soup. "What's so funny?"

"*You*," said Thea. "You *and* Knox. You're both totally ridiculous. Why don't the two of you just get a room and get it over with already?"

"You're vile, you know that?"

"Fine," said Thea. "Play your stupid flirty games with each other, but I'm not helping you plot against our sister."

"It's not a plot," said Willa. "It's an act of love and goodwill. Don't you want Connie to find lasting love?"

"You're scheming."

"For a good cause!"

"I have a crazy idea," said Thea. "Why don't you just *tell* Con about the bet and get her to agree to someone. If this house so important to you, do whatever it takes. It's not like Knox will know the difference."

*No, but I will*, Willa thought. "You don't understand, Thea. It's the principle of it."

"Spare me."

"Pretty please?"

"There *is* Wes Carson," Thea said. "He's been with the firm for a few months and he's not your typical attorney. He's kind of alternative. Brews his own beer. Hikes. Surfs. Kind of hot—not that I've looked, or anything."

Wes sounded promising. But how to get them together?

If Willa wanted this to have a chance, it had to feel natural, even with their deadline fast approaching. Connie could smell a set-up a mile away.

"I have to come in to Charleston tomorrow to do some deed research," said Willa. "I'll get Connie to come with me. We'll stop by the firm and we can, you know, just *happen* to run into Wes and then it won't seem staged...Okay, maybe a *little* staged."

Thea sighed. "I'm hanging up now."

"Have I told you lately how awesome you are?"

"I love you, too."

Willa hung up and pushed her bowl to the side, too excited to eat. An edgy, brainy attorney with a fondness for the outdoors? Connie would be putty.

No, she'd be softer than putty. She'd be butter. She'd be *melted* butter.

Willa smiled.

The bungalow was as good as hers.



# Chapter Four

Hugh Dunn was sorting a pile of receipts at his desk the next morning when his wife stormed into the office. He set down his pen and watched her march across the hardwood floor toward him, wearing a familiar look of outrage that needed no explanation—though Hugh imagined he would get one anyway.

He was right.

“Will you just *look* at these monstrosities?” Lily slapped down a glossy postcard, the heading in bold letters: *Find Yourself in Mariner’s Way!* “Have you ever seen anything uglier in your whole life?”

Hugh squinted at the advertisement for Arcadia Dune’s new condo village. “Well, there *was* that Sheepshead I caught off the pier in Folly that one summer.”

Lily folded her arms.

“Come on, Lil...” Hugh sighed. “What have I said about the uselessness of getting angry about something you can’t change?”

“I’m not angry. I’m frustrated. There’s a difference.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’m trying to keep an open mind, but this resort is going to put me in my grave, Hugh, I swear. After seeing this advertisement, I’m not entirely sure I have it in me to stand next to Davis Loveless in a receiving line and hold my tongue.”

“But for the sake of our sweet daughter’s lasting happiness, I suspect you will. Go next door and buy you a chocolate croissant?”

“Ugh, I can’t eat now.” She poked the postcard. “I might never eat *again* after seeing that.”

Hugh rolled his eyes. In a houseful of women, the drama never ceased. “Then how about some coffee?”

“Coffee I can do.”

She followed him into the office kitchenette. Hugh poured and then handed her the mug. "You think *you're* mad? You should have heard Willa. I'm genuinely worried about letting her next to anything flammable."

Lily smirked over the top of her coffee. "Then we'll make sure to seat her next to the fire extinguisher at dinner."

Hugh chuckled. "Peach and Brady *are* an unlikely pair, that's for sure."

"People said the same thing about us too. That I was only marrying a Yankee to make my family furious."

"Which you *were*."

She shrugged. "Maybe a little. Maybe at first."

Hugh took Lily's coffee from her hands, set it down and swept her into his arms. "But then you realized I was more than just a sexy hunk of meat and you actually fell in love with me."

Lily turned up her face to meet his loving gaze and smiled. He jiggled his eyebrows, just enough to make her laugh, then planted a warm kiss on her lips.

"And it was a brilliant plan, too," she said, "until my sisters met you and liked you almost as much as I did."

Hugh drew back and looked down at her a long moment. "I like Brady Loveless, Lil. What father wouldn't? He's a hardworking man who adores our daughter and wants her to have everything her heart desires. Show me where it says I'm supposed to dislike the boy."

Lily sighed. "I just wish he didn't have to fund Peach's 'everything' by building houses that are destroying the historic fabric of our town."

"It's his town, too, Lil. And you know Loveless Construction has made changes in their building practices to incorporate sustainability..."

Her hazel eyes sparkled; she didn't want to budge, he could see it. "Yeah, well. They could still do more."

Hugh grinned. "Couldn't we all?"

"Speaking of our little firestarter..." Lily glanced back at the office floor. "Where are the girls?"

"Charleston," Hugh said. "Something about deed research."

\* \* \*

Connie and Willa descended the steps of the county offices under a threatening sky. "I still don't see why I had to come in with you for this," Connie said.

"Because you're so much better at deed research than I am." Willa scanned the street for their parked car. It wasn't a total lie; Connie *was* far more organized when it came to searching property records for historic landmark applications.

"Well, I still say we could have done it all online." Connie pushed up her glasses.

"And miss a chance to come into Charleston on such a beautiful day?"

"You're kidding, right?" Connie pointed to the cover of gray above them.

"Will, there's a ninety percent chance of rain."

"Which means there's a ten percent chance of *sun*," Willa said, steering them to the Bug.

"Just so long as we don't hit any traffic on the bridge going home." Connie climbed into the passenger seat. "I'm starving."

"So let's not wait. I was thinking we could swing by Thea's office and see if she'd join us for lunch."

Willa watched Connie's eyes narrow into familiar slits. "Thea doesn't do surprises, you know that. She hates it when we just drop-in on her."

Willa snorted and waved her hand. "It's fine."

Fifteen minutes later, they were stepping off the elevator at the third floor, walking through pivoting glass doors into the firm of Reynolds and Isaacson. With its chocolate leather seating, frosted sconces and dark mahogany paneling, the office's decor was every bit as conservative and traditional as the cases its attorneys handled. Willa could never understand how her sister could bear to work there.

Willa set her arms on the deep, polished counter and leaned over to smile down at the firm's receptionist. "Hi, Denise. Is Thea in?"

Denise, a no-nonsense blond just out of law school, held up her index finger. Willa nodded. Thanks to headsets, it was impossible to tell if Denise was on a call or not. Hence, the finger.

Willa smiled. "We'll wait."

"Hey, Denise."

Willa turned and took in the pleasing figure of a man approaching the desk. His red hair was short but spiky and he was dressed in a t-shirt and worn jeans, an outfit far too casual for the firm. A bike messenger, Willa decided. He had that carefree gait of someone happily outside the confines of the corporate world. No wonder she was instantly attracted to him.

He arrived at the reception desk and set down a manila envelope. "Send this Priority for me, would you, Denise?"

Denise looked up and tugged her microphone under her chin. "Sure thing, Wes. Oh, Lincoln Webb stopped by while you were in the meeting, asked if you'd give him a call."

Willa blinked at him. "*You're* Wes?"

He turned to meet her stare, his expression tentative. "Have we met?"

Willa cringed inside, realizing her blunder. "No," she blurted hoping Connie wouldn't catch on. "Just that Thea's mentioned you. I'm her sister. We're *both* her sisters, actually. I'm Willa. This is Connie."

Connie gave a shy wave.

Wes looked between them. "Hi."

Good Lord, Thea had *completely* underplayed Wes! *Kind* of hot? He was dangerously hot. His eyes were a color you were sure had to be contacts, too pure a turquoise to be real. And his body was insane. If there was an ounce of body fat on him, Willa would have been hard pressed to find it. Not that she

would have been opposed to the search...

"Are you two here to see Thea?"

She looked up, startled out of her musings. "I'm—we're—"

"Yes." Connie rescued her. "We're here to see Thea."

"Oh. Okay." Wes smiled.

Willa wanted to melt into the carpet and become invisible. She could have managed it too; she was suddenly sweating her life away. A surge of heat had burst under her armpits. Was her face red too? God, she hoped not.

She glanced at Connie. Willa's sister looked at her like she'd grown an extra head.

"Here comes Thea now." Connie waved toward the hallway.

Willa turned to watch her sister approach, relief filling her.

"Thee, I'm sorry. I told Will we should have called you first," Connie said.

"It's okay." Thea leaned in to give both women a hug. "How long have y'all been here?"

*Just long enough for me to make a complete ass of myself.* "Not long," Willa said. "Can you grab some lunch with us? Our treat."

"I wish I could," said Thea, "but my nine o'clock meeting got rescheduled to one so I won't have time." Thea smiled at Willa. "I see you've met Wes."

Willa smiled back. "We have."

"Why don't you two try that new Thai place I told you about," Thea said. "Taste of Thai. I can give you directions."

"Actually, I'm going right past it to meet someone if you want me to show you the way," Wes said.

"I don't know if we should walk," said Connie. "It looks like it's about to pour any second."

Willa scoffed. "Oh, it's fine." She turned Connie toward the elevator, seeing her opportunity and seizing it. "See ya, Thee!"

Connie managed a quick wave just before Willa pushed her into the elevator.

\* \* \*

Four blocks.

That was how long Willa had to prove to Connie that Wes Carson was her perfect wedding date. Not that Willa imagined Connie needed half that—the man was an absolute fox. Why Connie wasn't falling all over herself already had Willa baffled. She raised her index finger to her lips and lowered it before she could chew her nail, remembering Peach's threat.

Wait—Wes had said he was meeting someone. What sort of someone? A date? A former girlfriend looking to become a current one again?

Never mind. Willa glanced up, seeing they'd already covered two blocks. *Focus.*

"So what kind of law do you practice, Wes?"

"Mostly intellectual property cases. It's an expanding area of law that fascinates me. So much is still up for grabs. It's exciting."

His eyes danced with enthusiasm as he talked. In Willa's opinion, there were few things sexier than a man who loved what he did with his life.

"That's so interesting to hear." Willa glanced over at Connie to make sure her sister was listening but Connie was scrolling through her phone. Willa nudged her. "Isn't that interesting, Con?"

"It is, absolutely." Connie smiled at Wes then returned her gaze, and her smile, to her phone.

Willa glanced down the street, seeing the sign for Taste of Thai at the end of the block. She may have been a lot of things, but subtle wasn't one of them. "Are you sure we can't convince you to join us for lunch, Wes? We'd love to hear more about the work you do. Connie and I are in Historic Preservation so we understand what it's like to feel like you're reinventing the wheel every day."

He smiled. "I appreciate the offer but I'm meeting a friend."

A friend. Willa's mind raced. A friend could mean a lot of things.

"Maybe your friend likes Thai."

Wes laughed. God, he had a great laugh. It was warm, genuine. "I'm afraid not. She has her heart set on a burger at Closed For Business."

*She.* Willa tried to keep her smile hopeful despite the pronoun.

"Here we are," Wes said, slowing in front of a decorated sandwich board, Taste of Thai painted at the top in swirling purple script.

"Thanks for the escort," said Willa.

"Yes, thanks," said Connie, sliding her phone back into her purse. About time, Willa thought.

"Maybe we can take a rain check and chew your ear another time, Wes," Willa said, thinking how wrong that sounded after she'd said it.

"Great. And I'd like to hear more about your work, too. Thea's talked about your family's preservation business. You two sound like my kind of wave-makers. We should have a beer sometime. Compare notes."

"I'd love that," Willa said. "I mean, *we'd* love that."

Wes reached into his back pocket for his wallet and tugged out a pair of dog-eared business cards, handing one to each of them. "I have a good friend in Magnolia Bay so I come out there fairly regularly at this time of year. You two ever go to The Crab House?"

"Oh, sure, all the time," Willa said.

"Maybe we could meet up there. Split a sampler."

"Definitely." Willa turned to Connie. "Con, do you have a card on you? I left all of mine in the car."

Connie rummaged through her purse while Willa smiled at Wes. "Here." Connie handed him one. Wes read it, then pocketed it.

"It was great meeting you both." He extended his hand. Willa moved to take it but waited for Connie to shake first.

When he'd left, Willa turned to Connie. Her sister's frown startled her.

"What?"



"You *loathe* The Crab House," said Connie.

"Loathe is a strong word."

"You accused the owner of breading tube socks and selling them as clam strips."

"Okay, so maybe I didn't like *one meal* I had there, but I'm not opposed to giving it another chance. It's obvious Wes is interested in you and I didn't want to discourage him."

Connie stared at her. "In *me*?"

"He gave you his card, didn't he?"

"He gave both of us his card."

"Oh, he was just being polite." Willa steered them to the restaurant door and let Connie enter first. The warm, sweet smell of curry and coconut milk flooded Willa's nose. "All I'm saying is that showing up to the wedding on Wes Carson's arm would certainly make Elliott look twice. I mean, wow."

"I don't know," said Connie, following Willa to a table by the window. "Wes seemed pleasant enough but—"

"*Pleasant enough?*" They sat. "Con, do you need new glasses? He's gorgeous."

"If you think he's so gorgeous, *you* should ask him to the wedding. After all, you were the one practically speaking in tongues when he showed up."

"I was not," Willa insisted, taking up her menu. "I was just—you know—startled, because he's so different from the guys we usually see there, and I know you like edgy guys so why not just—"

"What do you think about Jay Preston?"

Willa blinked over the top of her menu, thrown by the question. "Who?"

"The guy who came in with Knox the other day." Connie smiled.

Willa knew that smile. It was the same one Connie had worn when she came back from the music festival after meeting Elliott Grant. Two weeks later, they were living together.

"Do you think you could ask Knox if he's dating anyone?"

Willa opened her menu and scanned it. "Do you want split an order of Pad Thai? I think Thea said the portions here were huge."

"Will, did you hear what I said?"

"Of course I did," Willa answered without looking up. "Ask Knox about John."

"*Jay*," Connie corrected. "So will you?"

"Next time I see him, sure." Willa glanced around for their waitress, suddenly desperate for a Coke.

"You don't have to come right out with it," Connie said, closing her menu. "Just, you know, maybe casually mention it. I don't want to seem desperate."

"Speaking of not seeming desperate..." Willa leaned forward. "Don't forget this afternoon is the Home Tour Selection Committee meeting. I need you and Mom there if we're going to get our nomination through."

"Are you sure you can go?" You have your fitting at Teeny's."



"The meeting starts at four; Teeny's is three blocks away," said Willa. "I'll make the fitting in plenty of time."

"You better—or Peach will strangle you in your sleep."

"That's one way to get out of going to the wedding," Willa mumbled.

Their waitress arrived. "Ready to order, ladies?"

"I think we are," Connie said, handing off her menu. "I'll have the Pad Thai."

"And for you, ma'am?"

Willa turned to meet the waitress' cheery smile, feeling her own sinking. "I'll take your biggest bowl of crow, please."

The waitress frowned down at her. "I'm sorry?"

Willa sighed. "Never mind," she said, surrendering her menu with a smile. "I'll just have what she's having."



# Chapter Five

By the time Willa stepped into the Magnolia Bay's Historical Society for the selection committee's meeting at four, the rain clouds had blown away to reveal a flawless roof of blue.

But despite the optimistic weather, she still worried.

There was no guarantee that her aunts, the Bloom Bitches, would show mercy and allow her nomination for the House Tour to pass to the next round if Willa didn't have the requisite three votes—no matter if they were family.

The ornate interior of the meeting room was crowded, many of the board members and representing home owners gathered against the far wall where carafes of weak coffee and pitchers of overly sweet tea bookended plates of cookies and brownies. The refreshments would be the only sugar her Aunts Camellia and Daisy would be serving this meeting, Willa suspected.

"They're still waiting for two board members," Connie whispered when Willa slid into the seat her sister had saved at the table. "If they run late, you'll never make the fitting."

"I'll make it," Willa whispered back, pulling out her notebook and a pen. She searched around to see the usual suspects filling out the committee's long, oak table, and the two dozen folding chairs behind it. Wait—was that Knox, talking to Joe Sheridan, the committee chair?

Willa frowned. "What's Knox doing here?"

"I was wondering the same thing," said Connie. "He never shows up to the home tour committee meetings."

Just then, Knox's gaze shifted and found Willa's across the table. He waved. She waved back, feeling a flurry of pleasure at the unexpected exchange—or maybe it was seeing him in his royal blue collared shirt, the rich color darkening his eyes.

He mouthed something to her. Willa shook her head at him, unable to

make it out. Knox grinned, picked up his notepad, scribbled then turned the page to face her.

Plan to watch me all this meeting too?

He wished! She snapped the top off her pen and scrawled her answer on a blank page then spun her notebook so he could see.

In your dreams.

He chuckled and wrote his response: *My dreams are dirtier.*

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She motioned for him to turn the page out of view before anyone else read his words but all her urging did was widen his grin and keep the notebook still. God, he was impossible!

"Just look at them, will you?" Connie whispered, nodding to the head of the table where the Aunts were holding court. "The meeting hasn't even started and they already look disgusted. I bet they're still smarting from Darcy Vance's application."

"Just wait till they see what I nominated for the tour."

Connie sighed. "You know we all appreciate your pluck, Will, but no way will the Bitches allow a Doggy Daycare in their Historic Home Tour. Even if it *was* the original post office."

"It doesn't matter if they agree or not," Willa said, lifting her chin. "We only need three votes to get it on the ballot. Yours, mine, and Mom's."

"Except Mom isn't coming."

"What?" Willa blinked at Connie. "Why?"

"Something about flowers for the wedding. Peach is in a total panic. Mom offered to go into Charleston to help. She just texted me."

"But she knows we can't secure this vote without her."

"She felt terrible, Will, but you know how important this wedding is."

"Damn." Willa sighed. "I might as well leave now and spare us the humiliation," she said, looking toward the door.

"Too late," said Connie.

"Let's all take our seats!"

The call to arms came from Aunt Daisy. Willa slunk deeper into her chair and resigned herself to failure as the selection committee roared into action. The first five nominations sailed through without contention, not surprising since they were all homes of current board members, and all on desirable Bayshore Drive. From time to time, Willa found her gaze drifting across the table to Knox's seat, startled to find him attentive to the activity around him. Why wasn't he on his phone, or doodling on his notepad?

When it was time to announce the sixth nomination, Camellia stopped short and squinted at her sheet. "What in the world? This can't be right," she declared, frowning up and down the table. "Did someone nominate Barkers by the Bay?"

"I did," said Willa, raising her hand.

As expected, a bustle of voices rose around the room.

"Willamena, you're not serious?" Daisy asked.

"Very," said Willa, rising from her seat, in too deep now to jump ship. "We have all these historic buildings on Main Street and we never feature them."

"That's because it's called the Historic Home Tour," Camellia snapped. "When we decide to change the name to the Historic *Business* Tour, we'll let you know. All right; moving on." She glared at the agenda. "Next for nomination we have the—"

"Now hold on." Knox's voice rang out above the din. "I think Willa has a point."

Willa's eyes jerked to Knox then to Connie's then back to Knox.

Had she just heard what she *thought* she'd heard?

"The goal of this tour is to remind people of the importance of historic preservation, isn't it?" asked Knox.

Camellia and Daisy shared a wary look. "Ye-es," Daisy answered.

Knox continued, "Adaptive reuse, such as Barkers by the Bay, is a well-documented type of historic preservation. Therefore, I think we need to represent it just the same as every other example of Magnolia Bay's preservation efforts."

Connie leaned over and whispered, "Did you put something in his coffee?"

Willa shook her head, too stunned to speak.

"Why not let the Board vote and decide?" Knox suggested to Camellia and Daisy, with a smile that would have melted the polar ice caps.

Unfortunately, there was no thawing out the Bloom Bitches.

Willa appreciated Knox's effort, but without her mother there, a vote was useless.

Still, the Aunts were nothing if not by-the-book.

"Fine." Camellia's pink lips crinkled. "Who wishes to see Barkers by the Bay on this year's tour?"

Willa's hand shot up, Connie's followed.

But the Bitches were already wearing victory smiles.

Daisy folded her hands over her notes. "I'm afraid you need three votes, Willamena, dear."

"Mine makes three."

Willa turned to see Knox Loveless, his smile as high as his hand.

"Holy crap," Connie whispered.

Daisy and Camellia exchanged another look, this one all ice, but it was Daisy who finally admitted defeat.

"Against the better wishes of the Board, Barkers by the Bay has been nominated for this year's Historic Home Tour."

Unable to hide a smile, Willa looked across the table and found Knox's gaze already fixed on her, his coffee cup raised in quiet toast.

But just above his head, the room's wall clock bore a jarring reminder.

"Oh crap," Willa whispered, reaching down to grab her purse. "I'm late."

\* \* \*

Willa wanted to bask in their unexpected victory—not to mention their

strange rescue by Knox—but she had a bridesmaid dress to be stuffed into.

“I was worried you forgot!” Teeny met Willa at the front door of her store with a man’s suit draped over her arm. “Sugar, go on to the dressing room, everything’s ready for you,” she said, hurrying Willa inside. “I just have to finish up with another client and then I’ll be right with you.”

Willa made her way through an arbor of silk flowers and white Christmas lights and found her dress waiting for her, as promised. It hung from the shuttered dressing room door, puffy and shiny and looking like a giant—well—*peach*.

“The faster you get in it, the faster you can get *out* of it,” Willa whispered as she hauled the garment bag into the small pink closet, pinned up her curls into a lazy twist and undressed. Pulling it on nearly exhausted her; walking out in it she sounded like a floor sander taking off five coats of finish. And Good Lord, was it heavy! She had managed to get her zipper up most of the way, but it would take another pair of hands to finish the last few inches.

“Oh!”

Somehow, above the crackling din of crinolines and shifting satin, Teeny’s gasp of delight made it to Willa’s ears.

She spun to see the bridal shop’s proprietor beaming in the doorway.

“You are a vision, Willamena Dunn. Have you even seen yourself yet?”

“I’m afraid I’m still making my way to the mirror, Miss Teeny. These dresses should come with hand trucks.”

“Here. Let me help you with the zipper and then you can get the full effect.”

Willa smiled politely but she wasn’t sure she could *handle* the full effect.

Teeny tugged the zipper to the top then moved around Willa, fluffing the skirts every few inches until she was satisfied. She stepped back and pressed her hands to her throat. “Oh, it’s so pretty.”

Willa stood in front of the mirror, trying vainly to make her expression match Teeny’s.

“It’s perfect,” said Teeny, sniffing. She fanned herself with her hand. “I’m sorry. I always do this.” Teeny pulled a tissue from the heart-shaped pocket of her jacket and dabbed at her eyes.

The bell rang out from the front room. “That’ll be my next fitting,” Teeny announced. “Take your time, sugar. Soak in just how beautiful you look. I may be a few minutes getting back here but when you’re ready to unzip let me know and I’ll come back as soon as I can, ’kay?”

Willa nodded, not wanting to hurt Teeny’s feelings but, good God, the only thing she wanted to soak in was a hot bath and get this sausage casing of a dress off as fast as possible. Still she waited until Teeny had left before she let her tight smile collapse.

Alone, she turned from right to left to give her reflection a final look.

She supposed it could have been worse. The watercolor-look of the blended pink and peach at the base of the skirt was a bit much, but at least it



was unique. And the bodice did make her breasts look fuller than any bra had ever done. And she'd never had much in the way of hips, so the cinched waist that flared out gave her an enviable shape. A flicker of pleasure overtook her. Maybe it wasn't the worst thing she'd ever had to wear.

"Meen?"

She spun around at the man's voice and her breath caught. Knox Loveless stood there in a khaki suit.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Same thing as you," he said. "Just not in a, you know, *dress*...Wow." His gaze traveled her body. "I barely recognized you."

She frowned at him. "Gee, thanks."

He continued to drink her in, his survey so indulgently slow, that every inch of Willa's exposed skin prickled with heat.

He smiled. "Who knew under all that bull-headedness was such a gorgeous woman?"

"And who knew under all that *bullshit* was the same infuriating man?"

His smile ebbed. "I'm serious, Meen." Willa couldn't recall ever hearing his voice so tender. "You look incredible."

She met his brown eyes, seeing the sparkle of genuine admiration there and feeling another burst of heat bloom inside her, much lower this time. "Thanks," she said. "You don't look too bad yourself."

That was an understatement. He took her breath away is what he did. The tan of his jacket and vest set off the auburn in his brown hair, his heavy brow. The deep port of his tie against the white of his shirt.

Willa looked away. "I should get this off."

"Want me to help...you know..." Knox gestured to the back of his neck. "Unzip you."

"I can do it."

"You sure? I'm pretty good with those things."

He *would* have to say something to ruin it.

"I'm sure you have *plenty* of experience helping bridesmaids out of their dresses, Knox," she said, "but I think I can manage this one myself, thanks."

Willa had been sure the comment would glean a chuckle from him but Knox only stared back at her, his eyes thoughtful. Serious. He held up his hands and took a step back. "It was just an offer. No harm intended."

The sober way he was looking at her—had she hurt his feelings?

No, she couldn't have.

Could she?

"I have to go," Willa said, sweeping up her skirts and tugging on the latch, desperate to get inside the changing room and away from him. She closed the door and fell against it, trying to slow her racing heart. This stupid dress! She wanted it off. Everything about it irritated her. It itched, it pinched, it squeezed—*Off*.

Her hands shaking, Willa reached back, straining to reach the dress' zipper.

Surely she could do this herself. She slapped at her back, straining to grip the tab but it was no use.

After several minutes of flailing, and nearly winded from her efforts, Willa dropped into the upholstered chair and considered her options for escaping this miserable satin straightjacket. Teeny was with a customer. Who knew how long before she would return? Willa could either wait or...

She looked at the dressing room's pink shutters, knowing she had no choice.

She moved to the door and cleared her throat.

"Knox?" she called out softly. "Knox, are you still here?"

"I'm here."

Willa pushed the door open and stepped out. "Could you just...?"

He smiled, understanding. "Sure."

Willa walked to him and turned to allow him at her zipper. Facing the mirror, she met his eyes in their reflection and felt a burst of uncertainty. "I just need you to start it," she said. "Just a little. I can get the rest—"

"Relax, Meen." Knox smiled at her in the mirror. "I'm not going to strip you."

Right. She rolled her lips together and looked down, waiting.

When the weight of his fingers landed on her back, she sucked in a quick breath. She only hoped he couldn't feel her heart pounding through the dress. What was wrong with her? It was just Knox Loveless helping her with a damn zipper. Why wouldn't her pulse slow down?

The tiny teeth gave. Willa felt her bodice loosen, like someone had finally let her exhale.

Knox lowered his hands. "All set."

She turned to face him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

She met his eyes, regret filling her. "I'm sorry for that comment about you and bridesmaids and their dresses. That was a rotten thing to say."

"It's okay. I probably deserved it."

"And thank you, too, for what you did at the meeting. For standing up for us. For the Barkers, I mean."

"It needed to be done."

Willa smiled. "You do realize going against my aunts means you'll only have a harder time now when you want to fix up the bungalow?"

"Something tells me I'm bound to have a hard time with them no matter what." Knox shrugged. "I figured it was worth the sacrifice."

They looked at one another for a long moment, the room quieting with their unexpected truce. Under his appreciative gaze, Willa felt her skin warming again.

She looked away, needing to break whatever spell had come over them.

"I haven't forgotten our bet, you know," she said.

"Neither have I. Any progress on your end?"

"Lots, as a matter of fact," she lied.

"I'm glad to hear it." Knox looked at her another beat, his eyes searching hers before he said, "I should let you get changed. We both have work that won't wait."

Work. Right.

She nodded firmly. "Yes, we do."

Knox walked to the door. "See you later, Meen."

Then, with a final smile, he stepped out of the room.

Good, Willa thought, relief swelling as she rushed into the closet, shook off her dress, and wrestled it onto its hanger. She and Knox were back to their usual corners, back to their familiar, comfortable banter.

Only when she'd left the shop and returned to the warm, tangy air of early evening did her relief give way to regret.

Crap. She had completely forgotten to ask Knox about Jay Preston. Connie would be heartbroken.



## Chapter Six

What the hell was *that*?

Knox steered his Jeep down Main Street, trying to wrap his head around his encounter with Willa in the bridal shop.

For starters, she'd looked incredible. Just like the way she'd looked that summer when she'd come back from California. Seeing her in that bridesmaid dress, witnessing the curves of her body that she always hid under over-sized t-shirts, his head had spun. Then, helping her with her zipper, he'd made her feel foolish for worrying that his intentions were anything but honorable when the truth was his hands had wanted to stray from that tab. He'd wanted to lower his mouth to her ear, take the meat of her lobe between his teeth and tug hard, just to hear whatever sound might escape her throat. He'd wanted to reach around to the swell of her breasts and slide his hands down the front of her dress to free them—

Shit. He slammed on the brakes to avoid rear-ending the car in front of him.

He leaned back and released a ragged breath.

*Easy, tiger. Watch the damn road.*

Over the years, he'd wondered what kind of lover Willa was, if she was as easily excitable and hot-tempered out of her clothes as she was *in* them. And maybe a few times when he'd taken a woman to bed, he'd made comparisons—if they could even be called that, since how could he compare one lover to a woman he'd never gone to bed with?

*Yet.*

The word slipped through before Knox could stop it.

Okay fine, dammit. Here, alone in his car, staring out at traffic, he could admit it.

He wanted Willa Dunn.

There.

And while Knox was making confessions, he didn't want her the way he wanted Jenny Anderson or Karen Bates or any number of women who came in and out of his field of vision through the course of a day living and working in Magnolia Bay. Sure, those women were beautiful and interested and sparked something primal in him, but it was a craving he knew could be quenched as easily as thirst with a cold beer.

His desire for Willa was different. It was something he could imagine enjoying over and over, something lasting that wouldn't be satisfied with one night.

His mind raced at all the ways he wanted to have her, all the places he wanted to turn her on. He wanted to have her body slowly, and then he wanted to have her quick. He wanted her in the bed of a four-star hotel; he wanted her on the bare floor of an old house.

But most of all, he just *wanted* her.

Knox reached down and poked at the Jeep's stereo, grateful for the rush of music to quiet the clamoring of his thoughts. Was it any wonder he'd buried his feelings for her? They would always start out so simply, so pure, only to become a tangled knot of conflicted desires. The desire to have her, the desire to keep things the way they were. Uncomplicated. Without expectations, without confusion.

*Dad thinks you'll never settle down...*

Then today. Being near Willa, touching her, had set off something in him that Knox hadn't been prepared for, something he couldn't hush no matter how loud he turned up the music, no matter how fast he drained the flat Dr. Pepper he'd left behind in his cup holder.

In a few days, he'd see Willa in that dress again. Would his feelings crash and burn the same way?

He needed a distraction. A suitable one. Better yet, an *unsuitable* one.

Stopped at the light, Knox grabbed his phone off the seat and began scrolling through numbers.

He'd put it off long enough.

It was time to find a date for his brother's wedding.

\* \* \*

The first thing Willa saw when she returned to the office was the lavender pastry box on her desk.

The second thing she saw was her mother, wearing a purposeful smile as she lifted the box top to reveal its contents.

Willa's eyes narrowed. It was a well-known fact in Dunn family lore that any time someone showed up with a dozen of Hart's red velvet cupcakes, bad news—or an excruciatingly painful request—wasn't far behind.

"Is this because you missed the meeting?" Willa asked. "Because we got the vote through anyway."

"So Connie told me," Lily said. "And with the help of an unlikely ally,



too.”

Willa shrugged, not wanting to be reminded of Knox Loveless’ kindness so soon after their encounter at Teeny’s, the way her heart had raced when he’d laid his hands on her dress, the way her skin had tingled clear down to her toes when his thumbs had accidentally brushed the back of her neck. She’d already chewed off her last intact nail on the way back to the office.

“I’m sure Knox had an ulterior motive.” Willa gestured to the pastry box. “Then that means this is a bribe.”

“Yes,” her mother confirmed flatly, “it’s a bribe. And no, I won’t judge if you want to call them dinner.”

“Good.” Willa picked out a cupcake and took a generous bite before asking, “So what is it you want me to do?”

“It’s something I want *both* of us to do,” said Lily. “Something we need to agree to do.”

Willa slowed her chewing, nervous now.

Lily smiled. “I think you and I need to make up our minds to be kind about this wedding.”

“What exactly do you mean by *kind*?”

“I mean supportive. You know, cheery.”

This was terrible news. Willa enjoyed that her mother shared her outrage over this union. There was strength in their numbers, an extension of their mother-daughter bond that made her unique among her three sisters.

Lily clasped her hands under her chin. “So what do you say, sweetie?”

Willa released a weary breath. She wasn’t ready to cry “Uncle” but she knew better than to fight her mother when her mind was made up. Better to inhale a cupcake—or five—and call it a day.

“I suppose I might be able to sweeten up my attitude a little by the end of the week,” Willa said. “But flip-flopping doesn’t come naturally to me, Mom.”

“Well, dear daughter, I’m afraid you don’t have that kind of time. Tomorrow night is Davis’s reception at Sanctuary Hall for the bride and groom.”

Willa closed her eyes, the reminder sharp as a sting. “Oh, crap.”

“Ahem...” Lily cleared her throat. “As I was saying.”

Had Connie forgotten too? Willa glanced around the office, not seeing her sister. “Where’s Connie?”

“Oh, she went to get coffee with that friend of hers,” Lily said.

“Which friend?”

“Some man she ran into on the street. He said Loveless Construction is building him a house in Magnolia Run. Connie introduced me, but you know I’m terrible with names—“

“Jay Preston?”

Her mother’s face lit up. “Yes, that was his name. Good-looking fellow, too. Think she might be seeing him?”

Willa swallowed her last bite of cupcake, pushed out of her seat and rushed past her mother. "I'll be right back."

Lily turned in her chair to follow Willa's dash to the door. "Where are you going?"

"To avoid losing," Willa said over her shoulder.

Lily frowned at her exiting daughter. "Losing what?" she called out, but got only a slam in reply.

\* \* \*

Willa marched down the two blocks of Main Street toward Bay City Beans, fuming. Just when she'd been ready to see Knox Loveless in a fresh light after his shocking aid at the selection meeting, he had to return to his old tricks.

But an ambush? That was low.

Had he stationed Jay Preston outside of Dunn-Right's office so that Connie and he would conveniently "run" into one another as soon as Connie returned from the meeting? Did that mean Jay was in on this plot too? Willa doubted it. Like herself, Knox was far too proud of his skills at scheming to stoop to confession. It wasn't that Willa doubted Jay found Connie attractive—her sister was beautiful, of course the boy was smitten!—but the convenience of their run-in stank of strategy.

Either way, Willa would gladly throw a speed bump under their rapid acceleration toward romance. She hadn't even had time to organize a date between Connie and Wes, yet. For God's sake, give a girl a chance!

She slowed her pace a few doors away from the café, needing the extra time to cool her flushed cheeks and quiet her breathing. Not that there was anything strange in her arrival. It was dinnertime, she was hungry—who could suspect?

Willa stepped inside, greeted by the rich, nutty smell of freshly brewed coffee. Maybe she would get a coffee after all. Willa found Connie and Jay right away, tucked into one of the smaller tables by the window with coffees and a sandwich between them that they appeared to be sharing.

Food sharing already? This was more serious than she'd feared.

While the location of Connie's table wasn't ideal for a natural walk-by, Willa figured all she had to do was get within her sister's field of vision to get her attention, which might be harder said than done, considering Connie's entire field of vision seemed to be limited to Jay Preston's smile.

"Will?"

Spotted, Willa moved to their table.

"Oh, hi, Con." Willa offered her best shocked face. "I didn't know you were here. I just came in for a cup of coffee."

Her sister's blue eyes flashed skeptically. "So you decided you like their coffee now and that it doesn't taste like sugared swamp water?"

"Did I say that?" Willa sputtered out a nervous laugh. Good grief—her sister made it sound like she had a problem with every eating establishment in all of Magnolia Bay! She was particular. She had opinions. It wasn't a crime.

## Bet The House

Jay stood, offering his hand. "Good to see you again, Willa."

"You too. Con, I was thinking we should probably get together tonight and go over our notes for the next Board meeting."

"It's not for another week," Connie pointed out.

"But you know how I like to be prepared."

"Don't worry, Will. We'll have plenty of time."

"It's just that there are a *lot* of notes."

Connie set down her coffee and leveled an I-don't-know-what-you're-doing-but-stop-it look at Willa.

It worked. Willa knew when she'd pushed her luck.

"Okay, then." Willa started for the door. "I guess I'll meet you back at the office. Nice to see you again, Jay."

"Oh, Will?" Connie called. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Willa blinked at her; Connie raised her coffee—and one eyebrow—pointedly.

"Oh, right," Willa said, thumping herself on the forehead and slinking off to the counter.



# Chapter Seven

In the few years since its opening, Sanctuary Hall and Gardens had become one of Charleston's most popular event venues. What it lacked in historic fabric, it made up for in environmental kindness: a certified wildlife sanctuary for birds and butterflies, and a belief in using green materials on its grounds and in its celebrations.

Choosing Sanctuary Hall, and its shiny new construction, for his son's pre-wedding party was a calculated move by the senior Loveless. Willa had no doubt. "Ten bucks says Davis only picked this place to piss off the Blooms," she muttered as she and Connie crossed the lawn to the towering, all-white building that held the ballroom.

"Should we wait for Mom and Daddy before we go in?" Connie asked.

"We can wait on the steps," Willa said, pulling at her snug, silk pencil skirt as she walked. Why had she ever let Connie talk her into the static-y thing?

Her sister, however, looked radiant. If only Wes Carson were nearby, Willa couldn't help thinking. He'd take one look at Connie and propose—at which time Willa would lean in and gently whisper, "Easy, cowboy—why don't we just start with an escort to the wedding?"

She chuckled at the thought.

Connie glanced over as they mounted the long flight of stairs for the entrance. "What's funny?"

"Nothing. You look beautiful, Con."

"Thanks." Her sister patted her sleek up-do to make sure it was still intact. "I told Peach it was a little much but you know how she gets when we go to The Sassy Scissors. I can't believe you managed to get out of a visit."

Willa snorted. "The last time I sat in Aunt Rosie's chair she put in so many damn decorative clips I accused her of mistaking me for a pin cushion and I yanked out every last one before I was even out the door. Trust me—she's not coming near my hair again for all the sweet tea in Charleston."



Lily and Hugh caught up to them at the top of the steps where the double doors were opened wide.

"I'm glad to see we're all keeping to our agreement," Lily said, smiling at Willa.

Hugh held open the door and waved them inside with a sweeping motion.

"What agreement is that?" Connie asked.

Lily turned her daughters toward the attendant who waited for them in the candlelit foyer. "This night belongs to Peach, so never you mind."

\* \* \*

As predicted, Davis Loveless, in a blue suit with a bright yellow bow tie, and his older brother Teddy were already holding court in the center of the ballroom, an enormous open space with gleaming oak floors and an impressive wall of tall windows that looked out onto the gardens. Even the jazz pianist that played in the corner was no match for their booming voices.

Willa and her mother shared a quick, conspiratorial glance; a silent affirmation of their vow to keep tonight—and the rest of the wedding events—utterly peaceful, even if it killed them.

A pair of long tables, each covered in a crisp, white tablecloth with burgundy runners, and shimmering with silver platters and bowls of floating candles, occupied the room's center. A built-in bar bustled against one wall. The air was thick with the grassy, fruity scents of freshly cut flowers. Willa noticed oversized arrangements perched everywhere.

Connie scanned the groups of guests. "We should find Peach."

"We should find me a drink," Lily said. "Preferably strong."

"Think good thoughts," Hugh whispered.

"Good thoughts, good thoughts," Lily repeated softly.

"Lily Bloom!" Davis Loveless charged at them, arms wide and smile wider. "Young lady, how is it everyone else in this room looks ancient and you could still get carded at the bar?"

Hugh rolled his eyes. Lily smiled at her host. "Now, Davis, you know good and well that I've been Lily Dunn for over thirty years."

"What can I say? My memory's wrinkl'n' right along with the rest of me." He slid his gaze and hand to Hugh. "No hard feelings, eh, Hugh?"

The two men shook. "Not tonight, Davis," Hugh said, his answer causing Lily to bite back a snicker.

"And look at these two angels..." Davis shifted his mischievous blue eyes to Willa and Connie, not skipping a beat as he pulled each one in for a kiss on the cheek. "Now Lily, what exactly did you do to get so many beautiful daughters?"

Hugh stepped in to reclaim his wife. "She married *me*,"

\* \* \*

There was no question where Knox had inherited his charm, Willa thought as they slipped further away from Davis Loveless and deeper into the crowd.

Speaking of Knox...where was he? Willa scanned the room but didn't see

## Bet The House

him. A part of her hoped he *didn't* put in an appearance tonight. Their unexpectedly warm exchange at the bridal shop was still gnawing at her. Seeing him again so soon would only make it harder to put those confusing and irrational feelings away.

She leaned toward Connie and whispered, "I need to find a bathroom."

It was a lie. What she really needed was fresh air. Not five minutes in that room, in the company of so many Loveless men, and the thick cloud of their collective bluster was nearly making her eyes water.

Passing the windows, she glanced out at the lush gardens and courtyard below. Another event was going on, the grass covered with guests. Perfect, she thought, making her way across the ballroom to the exit and stepping out into the thinning light of dusk.

Safely down the steps and around the building, she wandered the perimeter of the courtyard, cloaked behind the fence of tall palms. The air seemed remarkably fresh. She drew in a deep breath, hoping it might temper her rising nerves. She'd never been much of a drinker—she couldn't hold alcohol to save her life—but tonight she wondered if she might not risk wearing a lampshade just to get through the next few hours. Which would infuriate Peach less—inebriation or a bad attitude?

The sky blazed with ribbons of violet and pink, casting their satiny glow on the courtyard's central fountain. The air feathered Willa's face, soft and warm and scented with a delicious mix of tropical plants and platters of boiled seafood. She closed her eyes and tried to let the calming breeze work its magic. She didn't want to go back inside until she was feeling—what was the word her mother had used—*cheery*?

"I'm not sure I've ever seen someone watch a sunset with their eyes *closed*."

Willa's eyes flew open at the man's voice and she stumbled back against the palm tree. "Wes?"

Wes Carson smiled. "Willa, right?"

"Right," she managed, blinking at him and trying to reconcile how he was here, of all places, of all nights. "What—what are you doing here?"

"This is a retirement party for one of the partners of the firm I used to work for," he said, hooking his thumb toward the crowd. "What about you?"

"My sister's getting married this weekend."

"Oh, right. Thea mentioned something about it. Is she here?"

"She got an excused for the evening thanks to a late meeting," Willa said. "*Conveniently*."

Wes grinned. "I take it you'd rather not be here, either."

"I can think of a few other places I'd rather be."

She had thought he looked good in jeans. Seeing him in dress clothes was an entirely new level of hot. Against the stark white of his shirt, his tan deepened and his red hair looked copper. Her gaze dropped to the narrow waist of his khakis. Just what sort of toned ridges could a person's fingertips learn along that stomach if she were to undo the buttons under that silver

belt buckle?

He took a step toward her, filling the air with the cool scent of aftershave. God, he even *smelled* good. "A few of us are going over to The Crab House later for beers," he said. "Maybe you want to come by and join me—I mean us."

Even as Willa's senses bloomed, strategy kicked in. It was kismet! She could get Connie to come with her and erase any lingering effects of her sister's date with Jay Preston. Never mind that she, Willa, was already imagining what sort of kisser Wes Carson might be.

If things went her way, Willa would figure out how to erase that, too.

\* \* \*

Knox was still knotting his tie as he walked through the marble entry and into the bustling ballroom. He hadn't meant to let Bud Warren buy him that second Jack and Coke, or the third. Now he was almost an hour late to his brother's reception and he hadn't had time to go home and change. Thankfully he'd found a tie shoved between the back seats—one he'd worn to a client meeting in Charleston last week and torn off within seconds of its conclusion. He'd rinse with the complimentary mouthwash they supplied in the bathrooms; the kind that made you think you'd swallowed an entire Christmas tree farm. He'd wipe the job site clay off his shoes with a paper towel. He'd clean up just fine and his father would *still* give him hell. What else was new?

Now if only he could find Justin or Brady before he found the old man—or the old man found *him*.

Knox glimpsed his younger brother through the crowd, alone at the wall of windows and staring out at the view of the gardens.

"Party breaking up already?" Knox called out as he approached.

Justin spun to face him. "Where've you been? Dad's all wound up." He stepped back, wincing. "Dude, you smell like a brewery."

"Bud insisted we stop for a few drinks. Who was I to say no to our newest client?"

"And you drove yourself here after that?"

"Hell, no. I took a cab." Knox squinted into the groups of guests that covered the gleaming oak floor. "Where's Brade?"

"Working the crowd, last I saw him. You do know you have mud all over your shoes, don't you? And where's your jacket?"

"Relax, I'll borrow one," Knox said, his brother's panicked voice doing nothing to inspire worry in him. Only when Justin turned and caught the glow of a nearby hurricane lamp did Knox notice the wet streak down one of his brother's cheeks.

"Hey..." Knox stepped closer. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Justin said, dragging a sleeve fiercely under his nose.

But he wasn't. Knox could see that—and he knew why.

"I'm thinking about her too."

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Their mother Anna had been gone five years now but every day still brought with it a new side of grief. Some days were harder than others. Family events, especially ones that celebrated new beginnings and the power of love, were the hardest. Weddings had always been Anna Loveless' favorite, although she'd never cried—rather it was a standing tradition that while all the other mothers in the church would blow their noses into their handkerchiefs when the bride and groom were announced, Anna Loveless would blow a whistle of cheer through her fingers, a trick her father had shown her when she was little.

She had been everyone's rock for so long, so fierce in the face of everything, so unsinkable.

Justin stared out at the view, his jaw clenched. "Mom should be here, dammit."

"She *is* here, bud." Knox swung his arm around his younger brother's neck and pulled him close. "She is."

"There you are, you slacker!" Brady appeared through the crowd and marched toward them, his blue eyes blazing. "I've been looking all over for you. Dad's getting ready to toast and he's busting a gut thinking you blew him off." Brady gave Knox a quick once-over. "Did you pull that tie out of your pocket?"

Knox made a face. "I'm offended by that question."

"And I'm offended by that *tie*," said Brady.

"Hey—" Justin squinted out the window. "Isn't that Wes Carson down there talking to Willa?"

Knox swerved his gaze to where Justin pointed and stared at the sight of Willa Dunn at the edge of the courtyard, bending in toward Wes Carson and laughing as if he'd just told her the funniest thing she'd ever heard in her whole damn life.

Knox felt as if someone had just taken the knot of his wrinkled tie and yanked. *Hard.*

\* \* \*

One hour.

As Willa stepped back into the ballroom, she decided that sixty minutes was a totally acceptable amount of time for a guest to stay at a party and still be considered polite. If broken down into segments of ten minutes—also a reasonable amount of time—Willa could easily engage every one of Peach's pending in-laws, keep her promise to her mother *and* still keep her date with Wes. Not that it was a date. She was really only doing this for Connie. No, she was really only doing this for the bungalow. But that was beside the point!

Now all she had to do was find Connie and clear the plan with her—not that Connie would need any coaxing. Willa spotted her sister across the room, trying to appear attentive to their Aunt Daisy. Willa suspected Connie would have rather been getting a cavity filled without Novocain.

And Connie wasn't the only one, apparently. Willa watched Peach rush



through the crowd, a salmon-satin blur topped by a mass of exquisitely arranged curls that Willa suspected had taken their Aunt Rosie the better part of an hour to make look so naturally tousled.

In the next second, Peach spotted her.

"Oh Willa, this is just awful—just the worst thing *ever!*" Peach pulled Willa off to the side.

"Calm down!" Willa tugged herself out of Peach's insistent grip.

"How can I calm down?" Peach cried, her usually rosy cheeks looking decidedly eggshell. "Aunt Camellia is furious because they spelled her name with only one L on the invitation. She said she might not even come now."

"Oh, Aunt Camellia is a spoiled brat who needs a swift kick. You should only *hope* she stays home."

Peach frowned at Willa, tears brimming. "I should have known you couldn't understand."

Willa's heart opened. Whatever differences stood between them, Peach was her baby sister and she didn't want to see her upset. Especially not during her own party.

Willa took her hands. "Peach, you can't let these people walk all over you. They're not important."

"They are to me," Peach said, her lip quivering. "I need you to go to the Ladies' Lounge for me. I've got a few extra sets of the invitations in my purse and I promised Uncle Don I'd send him home with a corrected one."

"The only thing that needs correcting is that grouchy old witch he's married to," said Willa, glaring past Peach into the crowd.

"Will, please," Peach begged. "I'd go get it myself but Brady doesn't want me leaving the party."

"Peach, it's one stupid piece of pap—"

"Please just *do* it!"

"Fine." Tired of the fight, Willa stalked off toward the lounge and pushed through the door, grateful to find it empty. She just wanted to sneak in and sneak out, find Connie and set up their exit plan. The last thing she needed was to get trapped.

She approached the pile of bags opposite the long vanity and dug in. From behind, she heard the creak of the door opening. She turned and gasped, startled to see Knox Loveless.

He grinned. "You were expecting someone else?"

"Yes, a *woman*. This is the Ladies' Lounge."

Knox glanced around. "So it is."

"You can't be in he—" She stared up at him, suddenly noticing his grin was more crooked than usual, his eyes uncharacteristically foggy. "Oh my God," she whispered, "are you *drunk?*"

"Tipsy." He held up his index finger. "There's a difference, young lady."

"Spoken like a true drunk." Willa turned back to the pile and saw the familiar copper of Peach's purse at last. Pulling it free, she hauled it up onto



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the counter and began to rummage through it for the invitation, trying to ignore the rather un-ignorable fact that Knox remained beside her, his shirt giving off the warm, musky scent of his skin beneath it.

"I didn't know you and Wes Carson were friends," he said.

Willa looked up at him. Knox must have seen her talking with Wes in the courtyard.

"You know Wes?"

"I've seen him around over the years. He's friends with Robby Cole. Wait—" Knox eyed her. "He's not your contender, is he?"

"What if he is? Wes is great."

"He's all right. If you like that kind of guy."

"You mean the kind who's smart and gorgeous and engaging?"

Knox's brow wrinkled. "You're going to lose this bet, Meen."

"And how do you figure that?"

"Because from what I saw earlier, you seem more interested in making Wes *your* date than your sister's."

"Why Knox Loveless..." Willa smirked, the cause of his critique suddenly clear to her. "I do believe you're jealous."

"Jealous of Wes Carson?" Knox snorted. "Please."

But Willa's smile—and conviction—remained. "Admit it," she said. "You're jealous that I would rather go to the wedding with Wes Carson than with you."

Knox pushed off the vanity and came toward her, his eyes darkening with a determination that stole the confident smile off her face. She reached for the edge of the vanity, needing to steady herself and not sure why. Memories of their encounter at Teeny's rushed back, how the nearness of him had excited her. Now he was closing in, and once again, her pulse was hastening.

"First off, Meen," he said, "I haven't asked you to the wedding. And *secondly*, if I wanted to steal you from Wes Carson, I could."

Willa lifted her chin to reclaim her cool. If only her damn heart would slow down!

"Trust me," she said, "you couldn't."

Knox folded his arms and leaned against the counter, one corner of his mouth sliding up. "And why not?" he asked.

Willa met his deepening gaze and answered, "Because I never date men with brown eyes."

"What?" Knox squinted down at her. "That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"It's true. Blue, gray, green. Even hazel is fine, but I can't do brown."

"You can't *do* brown? What does that even mean?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you." She dragged Peach's purse further down the counter to resume her digging.

"No, I think you do," Knox said, following her. "I think when a person says something so completely moronic, they should have to explain

themselves.”

Willa reached back into the purse and shook her head, refusing to indulge him. In the past few days, Knox Loveless had managed to turn her into a jittery, blabbering fool every time their paths crossed. She wouldn't let it happen twice in one week. No matter how warm her cheeks were growing.

“You're going to tell me you've never been kissed by a guy with brown eyes?” Knox said. “Not one damn time?”

Willa was about to tell him no and that she knew his ire was only because he had brown eyes, but when she looked up and met his gaze, she felt all her smugness, all her advantage, gone. This close she could see the strands of copper in his thick brown brows, similar strands in the tumbled waves of his hair. How had she never noticed the rings of green around his pupils?

Her scalp tingled just as it had when he'd met her eyes in Teeny's mirror and lowered his hands to her zipper.

She swallowed.

Knox leaned in, his voice husky. “Then maybe I should kiss you and break this stupid record.”

He no longer seemed drunk. His eyes remained level with hers, and darkening with intent.

“It's not stupid,” Willa whispered, unable to tear her eyes away from his. “It's just...just...”

Just what? *Say something, you idiot!* Willa chided herself silently, knowing that with every quiet second she allowed to pass, whatever energy that crackled in the air between them like heat lightning would only increase. Even now she felt unbalanced, as if the smallest shift in her weight would cause her to topple into him.

“Just what?” Knox pressed, his eyes dropping to her lips and stalling there.

“It's just the way it worked out,” she said. “It's not like I *planned* not to kiss men with brown eyes. I'm not *that* ridiculous.”

He grinned. “Yes, you are.”

He knew her so well. Too well. It was a bad thing to know someone as well as she knew him. Bad, bad, bad. Nothing good could come of kissing someone who'd tricked you into eating paste in Sunday School by telling you it was marshmallow fluff, or someone who'd scared you trick-or-treating by jumping out from behind a tree in a zombie mask.

Nothing.

So why was she still standing there getting lost in his eyes? Tongue-tied. Stuck.

“Just think of all the great brown-eyed men out there you might never give a chance to because of some idiotic rule,” Knox said. “I could be their hero. They'd build statues for me. Put me on the back of a coin.”

Willa's head screamed move *away*, but she knew her eyes spoke an entirely different plea: *Kiss me*.

Then, tipping his head down just slightly—this near, that was all it took—

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Knox leaned in and covered her mouth with his.

Willa wasn't sure if the sound that escaped her lips in the instant before was shock or surrender, or both. She only knew that this wasn't the kiss of a friendly wager, not the kiss of bitter rivals. It was heat and pressure, it was bold and insistent. His tongue teased its way through her lips and Willa let him in without resistance, sinking as he searched. She reached up to grip his collar, wanting to hold on, wanting to keep his lips on hers.

*"Oh, excuse me!"*

Willa broke away and twisted to see Sunny McCall, Magnolia Bay's seventy-six year-old librarian, in the doorway, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Shit," Willa whispered, grabbing Peach's purse and pushing past Knox for the door.



# Chapter Eight

**P**each.

Willa searched the room, feeling as drowsy and disconnected as if she'd just been woken from a deep sleep, her singular mission to find her sister, and hand off this purse and flee. Guests reached out to greet her as she moved, dazed, through their groups; she managed a polite smile and hello but she refused to be waylaid. Her head spun as if she'd just drained a glass of champagne in one sip. Her knees seemed in danger of collapsing her legs like a foldout table with unlocked hinges.

Where the hell was Peach?

Willa wouldn't—she couldn't—think about what had just transpired in the lounge.

Knox Loveless had kissed her.

Knox Loveless.

Had kissed her.

And not some quick I-dare-you peck but a deep, hard, hungry kiss. The kind of kiss that leaves a person winded as if they've just run a sprint. With their mouths.

Oh God, but that wasn't all of it. The worst part—the very worst part—was that she'd wanted him to kiss her.

And now he'd think—

Oh no, there was no letting him think anything.

But what could she do?

Marching back across the floor to find him was unthinkable. Leading him to think there was something to discuss, something to clear up, would only make this worse.

"Will, where have you been?" Willa spun into a blur of pink satin and wild red curls. "I've been frantic!"

"I couldn't find it right away..."

"Never mind." Peach yanked the bag from Willa's hands and tore it open. "Just go see if you can run interference with Brady long enough for me to fill this out. He's been on me like a horse fly."

"I can't, Peach. I don't feel well," Willa said, scanning the room for Connie. "I think I need some air."

Peach slowed her wild search and gave Willa an angry look. "Are you honestly going to fake being sick so you can rush off? Are you honestly that childish?"

"I'm not faking, I swear."

But Peach wouldn't be swayed. "Everything has to be about you or you don't want any part of it. You are so selfish, Willa Dunn!"

"Hush, y'all!" Connie appeared from around the corner, inserting herself between them. "Lord, can't you two go five minutes without fussing at each other? What's wrong now?"

"Apparently Miss Iron-Stomach-I-Never-Get-Sick is suddenly too ill to stay at my reception," Peach said. "You plan to fake appendicitis at my wedding, too?"

Connie studied Willa's face. "You do look a little flushed, Will."

"Oh, honestly!" Peach huffed. "The both of you, partners in crime—I give up!" Clutching her purse against her satin bodice like a wailing baby, Peach gave them both an admonishing look and charged off.

"Seriously, Will, are you okay?" Connie said. "Was it one of those little rolled crab things? They made me a little nauseous."

"I think it's just the heat," Willa said. She searched the crowd behind Connie to make sure Knox wasn't in sight. "Why don't we leave together? Get some fresh air. Go in to town."

"I don't think we should, Will. We did just get here—and honestly, I'm not sure I'll be up for any more company after this."

"I'm not saying we'd close down the bars, Con. Just a glass of wine by the water. It's such a beautiful night."

Connie shook her head. "I really think you should go home, Will. You seem..."

"I seem what?" Willa looked at her sister, panicked. Was her kiss with Knox that obvious?

"You seem a little—I don't know—off," said Connie. "Like you really might be coming down with something. Do you want me to drive you home?"

"I'm okay, I can drive myself," said Willa. "But how will you get home?"

"I'll get a ride with Mom and Dad. Or someone. Really, it's okay." She took Willa's hand and squeezed. "Go."

Willa looked out at the room again, wondering if Knox was somewhere in the mix of guests—or had he made a hasty exit after their encounter in the dressing room?

All at once, the crowd began to move toward the buffet table as the



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champagne was poured in preparation of the first of Davis Loveless' undoubtedly multiple toasts.

It was as good a time as any to make her escape.

\* \* \*

Walking barefoot across the Sanctuary's parking lot, her pumps in one hand, a can of ginger ale in the other, Willa tried to remember the last time she'd made such a mess of one evening. Why had she agreed to get Peach's purse in the first place? If she'd never stepped into that dressing room, Knox Loveless never would have followed her, and if he'd never followed her, they'd never have kissed. Correction: he would never have kissed her.

And if he had never kissed her, then Willa never would have kissed him back.

And while she was at it, why not bring Mrs. McCall into the blame game? If Magnolia Bay's librarian had only come in a few minutes earlier, if she'd forgone that last trip around the buffet table, that last stuffed mushroom, then she, Willa, and Knox would never have had time to give in to whatever moment of temporary insanity that had come over them.

Yes, Willa decided as she reached her car and flung her shoes into the back. This was all Mrs. Martin's fault.

She crawled into the driver's seat and downed her ginger ale, the spicy bubbles doing wonders for her roiling stomach. Her phone sat in the other cup holder. She stared at it, considering her next move. She'd just call Wes and explain that she wasn't feeling well. After all, what was the point in going to The Crab House to see him if Connie wasn't coming?

Or maybe...

Willa frowned out at the watery night.

Oh, who was she kidding? Maybe Knox was right. Maybe she did want to see Wes. Bringing Connie was only a convenient excuse. Besides which, her sister had made it abundantly clear that she wasn't interested in Wes Carson and no amount of pushing was going to change that.

Willa had been a fool to think this was a bet she could win.

Her thoughts spun back to her kiss with Knox. She reached for her ginger ale, feeling light-headed again, and drained it.

Fine.

Knox Loveless may have screwed up the reception but he wasn't going to ruin her whole night.

Ten minutes away Wes Carson—hunky, heartfelt Wes Carson—was sitting at The Crab House's bar, those beautiful blue—not brown!—eyes twinkling.

Willa knew just how to get the taste of Knox Loveless off her lips and out of her head.

\* \* \*

As promised, Wes Carson was in front of The Crab House when Willa arrived, which was fortunate because if he hadn't seen her car pull in to the parking lot and waved, Willa might have lost her nerve and kept driving for

home. As it was, she barely had time enough to check her hair and her teeth and reach back for her shoes before he met her at her car.

"You made it," he said, helping her out. "I wasn't sure if I would be able to compete with an open bar."

"Luckily for you I'm not a big drinker. Now if it had been an open sushi bar, you'd have been right to worry."

He laughed, closing the driver's door behind her. "Good to know."

They walked to the front of the restaurant and stepped into the noise and heat. Willa scanned the crowded interior. Yup, same ole Crab House. She couldn't believe she was back. The previous spring, she'd vowed never to give Patrick Reardon another red cent for his lousy food and now, here she was.

Oh well. Some things were more important than pride.

"Where are your friends?" she asked, stepping closer to Wes to be heard over the noise.

"They took off a few minutes ago." Wes leaned back to reach her ear, his breath warm and enticing against her skin. "Let me get you something to drink."

A smile spread helplessly across her face. He could have left with his friends but he'd waited for her. Willa tried not to let the encouraging news inflate her already racing pulse but it was hard not to.

They managed to secure a pair of stools at the bar and wedged themselves in. Wes ordered a beer for himself and a Jim and Ginger for her ("Heavy on the ginger, light on the Jim," she instructed the bartender.)

"I tried to get Connie to come too," Willa said, "but I think she'd had enough of loud rooms and excitement for one night."

"No offense to your sister, but I'm glad she bowed out."

Willa lowered her eyes to the tumbler that had been set in front of her and twisted the straw, feeling a new flush of guilt for abandoning the reception, for letting Knox Loveless shift her priorities, her loyalties.

"Tell me about your work," Wes said. "That is, if you don't mind talking about it."

"Are you kidding? It's getting me to shut up about it that's hard."

He laughed. Willa liked his laugh. It was a laugh with purpose, if there was such a thing.

"Did you always want to save old buildings?" Wes asked.

"Honestly, it's all I've known from the time I was young. My parents started their company when I was still crawling." Willa smiled. "They tell stories about how they used to bring me with them on site, when they'd survey an old building, take pictures, measurements, that kind of thing, and I'd toddle all over the place."

"Sounds like you had an untraditional upbringing, to say the least."

Willa rolled her eyes. "You have no idea. Some kids played with rattles and cloth blocks. I played with molding profiles and carpenter squares. My mom said I cut my first tooth on the edge of a tape measure."

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Wes looked at her. "That sounds painful."

"Yes, but I'm a lot of fun at parties," she teased with a wink. "I can shell a pecan with one bite."

"A good talent to have."

"Particularly at the holidays," she said, now thoroughly enjoying their banter. Willa sipped her drink, feeling her limbs lighten with the softening of the alcohol. "What about you?" she asked. "Any special talents?"

"Let me think..." He smiled. "I can wiggle my ears. See?"

"Wow." Willa watched, impressed. "Any other tricks with body parts I should know about?"

Wes leaned closer, his voice dropping. "Not any I can show off here."

\* \* \*

Their glasses empty and their skin hot from the crowds, they wandered out to the restaurant's deck for some cooler air. Wes walked them to the railing where they enjoyed an uninterrupted view of the marina, the lights of the docked boats sparkling across the darkened bay. Away from the thumping noise of the jukebox, Willa could hear the soft lap of the surf, the unmistakable sound of hulls rising and falling, lifted and lowered, on the gentle waves of a night sea.

So much for her request to the bartender to go easy on the Jim Beam. Her head swam with the smoothness of too much alcohol, the pleasant blurring of thoughts and worries. She could walk home if she had to. Her apartment wasn't that far. And it was a lovely night.

So lovely.

She turned to Wes, seeing that he'd positioned himself closer than he'd been at the bar. His eyes scanned the water, giving her a chance to indulge in a lazy survey of his profile. His short red hair glowed under the deck's outdoor bulbs, his eyelashes, equally red, shimmered. He had a splash of freckles along his jaw Willa hadn't noticed before but now found indescribably attractive.

She sighed. "Hi."

He turned to face her, clearly amused at her greeting. "Well, hi," he said back. "Come out here often?"

Was he drunk too? Willa doubted it. He didn't seem like the kind of guy who got drunk off one beer. But he'd been drinking at Sanctuary Hall—surely he was feeling some kind of buzz by now?

She hoped so. Because she needed to be kissed and if he wasn't going to do it, she'd take matters in her own hands.

Afraid to hesitate, she reared up and kissed him, hard enough that his lips parted. She caught the tip of his startled tongue and drew back.

There, she thought as she looked up at him. Knox who?

She stepped back but Wes leaned in. "Not so fast," he said, sliding his hands under her hair and drawing her back for more. This time, it was him steering the kiss, his tongue, no longer surprised, now met hers.

And in the midst of her blissful, buzzed daze, an unwelcome thought flashed: Was Knox somewhere doing the same thing? Trying to wash off the taste of her kiss with someone else?

Willa shifted to shake off the thought, and her lips slipped.

Wes leaned back. "Something wrong?"

"No," she said. "No, nothing's wrong."

"Good." He smiled and went in for another go. This time Willa made sure to keep her focus, her mouth staying put under his, following the lead of his kiss. It deepened and she felt the reflexive tug of her core, the pull and swell of desire.

She moved back, wanting to slow things down. All the pieces were in place for a dangerous evening: a warm sea breeze, a blanket of stars, and a good-looking guy who knew how to kiss.

But as hungry as she was, Willa knew when to stop eating.

"It's late," she said.

"Enough excitement for one night, huh?" Wes' gaze caught on something past her. He chuckled. "Looks like sisters keep secrets after all."

"What do you mean?"

"By the bar," Wes said, pointing. "That is your sister, isn't it?"

Willa turned and squinted at the crowd along the deck's outdoor bar. Her search halted. It was Connie, all right. Her head was dipped toward someone, but Willa couldn't make out who.

Willa moved, nearly there, then her breath caught to see her sister's companion.

She might have guessed: Jay Preston.

## Chapter Nine

Morning brought with it a thin layer of early clouds and the faint ache of a hangover that Willa couldn't banish with any amount of coffee. Three cups in, at her desk and surfing the Internet to avoid facing the daunting pile of research that screamed for her attention, she recalled the previous night's events and wondered when her sister planned to arrive to work.

As much as Willa had wanted to rush over to Connie and confront her last night, she hadn't. Better to wait until morning, she'd decided. Besides which, Wes Carson's lips had been too persuasive a deterrent. Willa had turned back to them and found herself swept up into another explorative kiss. Since she was too drunk to drive, he'd walked her a few blocks toward her home where they'd indulged in several more kisses along the way.

Willa wouldn't admit to being hurt—after all, Connie had every right to go out with whomever she wanted to and if Connie was the kettle than Willa was most certainly the pot. She had no right being cross for Connie's lie; she, Willa, had been lately handing out her own like toothpicks at a diner.

But when Connie pushed open the office door at ten and fixed an angry look at Willa as she marched across the floor to her desk and dropped her bag hard enough to disturb a stack of papers on one end, Willa felt all her hurt dissolve. Pity took its place. She knew that angry look only too well. It was the scowl of rejection.

Sisterly loyalty flashed hot and quick. Damn that Jay Preston! Willa knew he wasn't to be trusted. Had he crushed Connie's heart soon after Willa had spied them, or had he waited until much later in the evening?

Based on the fierce expression on Connie's face, Willa suspected the latter.

With a gentle push, she didn't doubt Connie would spill everything. "Morning, Con. You okay?"

Connie remained silent, her eyes lowered to her computer as she punched in her password.



God, he must really have done a number on her.

"How was the rest of your night?" Willa asked.

"The rest of my night was *great*." The bite in Connie's tone was hard enough to send Willa back a step. "In fact, it was quite possibly the best night of my life thus far. All the way up until the part where I saw my *supposedly* ailing sister making out with Wes Carson—*then* learned that same sister I'd felt so sorry for had traded my love life for a building!"

Willa felt the blood drain to her ankles. Knox must have told Jay.

"Con, please. Let me explain..."

Connie leapt to her feet. "How could you? I thought Jay liked me—and all along he was just part of some dumb game."

"Jay *does* like you," Willa said. "I saw how he looked at you."

Connie remained unmoved. "Peach is right. You *are* selfish. You'd rather see me unhappy than lose a dumb bet to Knox Loveless."

"It wasn't about Knox," Willa said. "It was about the bungalow."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better? That you care more about a falling-down building than your own sister?"

"That's not true."

"I think it is." Connie shoved her chair back and stormed past Willa for the kitchenette.

Willa followed and positioned herself beside Connie at the counter while her older sister fixed herself a cup of coffee.

"Con, I'm really sorry."

"You're sorry, all right," said Connie. "Sorry that I spoiled your grand plan."

"Con—"

"Don't." Her sister put up a silencing hand and, coffee in hand, marched back to her desk, just as their mother stepped inside.

Suddenly the temperature in the spacious room seemed to rise ten degrees. Her mother, always able to size up sisterly tension on the spot, shot Willa a condemning look.

Willa may not have been the world's best cook but she knew enough to get out of a hot kitchen.

\* \* \*

The bay spread out before Willa, a soothing vista of calm water and tufts of pale marsh grass.

When she'd made a mess of things—which was more often than she dared count—Willa would invariably find herself on Bayshore Drive, walking the sidewalk along the bay. It always helped to remind her of the power of the tide, and the beautiful truth that nature was washing life's canvas clean every day. In time, her blunders would be washed away too.

But not today.

Regret surged again.

Connie was right. So was Peach. Willa had let her dream of owning that



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house override her good judgment. Worse, she might have hurt Connie's chances with a man she really liked. The first guy she'd liked since that cheating fink Elliott Grant had run over her heart.

There was only thing to do. After all, Willa made her living repairing old buildings—surely she could mend the beams and boards of Connie's burgeoning love?

Determination setting in, she walked back to her car.

\* \* \*

Contrary to Knox's claim, there was nothing "little" about the home that Loveless Brothers Construction was building for Jay Preston, as Willa discovered when she arrived at the shell of the multi-gabled, three-story home at the west end of Magnolia Run.

She scanned the job site, searching the crews for a familiar face. There was a good chance, of course, that Knox was here, but it was a risk she'd have to take to make things right for Connie. If Jay wasn't here, surely someone could tell her where to find him.

"Willa!" She looked across the driveway and saw Justin Loveless heading toward her. She'd always liked Justin. Try as he did to match Brady's big-shot swagger, he couldn't help letting the sweetness shine through. No matter how many years passed, Willa still saw the tow-headed boy who'd always smiled at her on his bike as he'd made loops around Magnolia Circle.

"Hi, Justin." She waved as he approached. "I'm looking for Jay Preston. Is he here?"

"He's over there on the phone, by the roofing truck."

Willa followed his index finger across the lawn; relief drenched her. "Thanks."

She made her way around the piles of lumber and stacks of roofing tiles to where Jay paced the sidewalk as he talked. Willa approached slowly, not wanting to interrupt him. Jay glanced up and saw her.

He ended his call and pocketed his phone.

"I didn't mean for you to cut your call short," she said.

"It's fine. If you're looking for Knox, he should be back anytime now."

"Actually, I'm here to see you." She smiled. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure." A compressor whirled to life a few feet away. Jay gestured to a spot further down the sidewalk; Willa followed.

"First off," she began when they were far enough away from the deafening noise, "I want you to know coming was my idea and if Connie knew I was here, she'd kill me."

"I don't know about that," said Jay. "Honestly, I think *I'm* the one she's looking to murder right now."

"She really likes you, Jay."

"And I really like her," he said. "But last night I think I blew it." He ran a hand through his hair. "Knox mentioned the bet and I figured he was kidding. I thought she'd find it funny."

A reasonable assumption, Willa thought, but then poor Jay hadn't known the minefield of history he'd stepped into. After enduring years of Willa's scheming, Connie no longer found any amusement in it.

Willa looked at him. "Jay, I need you to promise me you won't let my dumb move keep you from pursuing Connie."

"I wasn't about to," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was planning to stop by the flower shop to pick up a bouquet and surprise her with it at y'all's office on my way back to Atlanta this afternoon."

"You were?"

"I was also thinking about asking if she would like me to escort her to the wedding. She'd mentioned not having a date..." Jay gave her a tentative smile. "Is that too forward of me? I mean, it's your sister's wedding, and y'all don't know me from Adam."

"No," Willa said quickly, then again, firmer, "No! We'd be thrilled to have you there," she said, so grateful that she rushed at him for a hug.

"Wow," Jay said, startled. "I guess that answers my question."

Willa drew back with a sheepish grin. "I guess I'm a little relieved."

"I *am* sorry if I made things tough for you and Connie."

"Believe me; this is *nothing*," Willa waved her hand. "Welcome to my life. I get myself into these situations all the time."

Jay chuckled. "Knox said you were a little high strung. Actually, the word he used was *passionate*."

Willa blinked up at Jay, pleasure blooming in her stomach.

Knox Loveless had called her *passionate*? *Passionate* was a nice word. A complimentary word. The kind of word someone wants to hear in reference to themselves.

Could it be Knox had actually said something *nice* about her for once?

Maybe she'd been wrong to think his kindness at the meeting was just a ploy, just another layer of their never-ending competitions.

Suddenly her conflicted feelings about their kiss, about *him*, didn't seem so conflicted.

Jay's gaze cut to the street. "Speak of the devil..."

Willa turned just in time to see a white convertible slide up to the curb, the blond, ponytailed driver as familiar as her license plate. Knox sat in the passenger seat.

It only took Willa an instant to connect the dots.

*Jenny Anderson...she has a thing for groomsmen...*

Willa bristled. She didn't want Knox to see her here.

"Thanks for being so understanding, Jay." She turned and pressed her hand into Jay's for a brief squeeze. "My sister doesn't need my endorsement but she's about as amazing as they come."

Willa hurried down the sidewalk, grateful she'd parked on the opposite end where she could make her escape cleanly, without being seen by Knox. Safely inside her car, she heard the song of her phone and rummaged through her

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purse. When she saw the caller's name on the screen, her pulse quickened.

"Hi, Wes."

"Hey." His voice was as cheery as she remembered. "I wanted to thank you for last night."

"Me, too. I had a great time."

"I also wanted to ask if you'd have dinner with me this weekend."

Short of world peace, Willa wasn't sure she wanted anything more just then.

She frowned down at her ragged fingernails. "I wish I could," she said, "but this weekend's the wedding."

"Oh, that's right."

*Ask him.*

Why shouldn't she? She'd already lost the bet, and even after Jay's proposal, Willa suspected Connie's anger toward her would remain, not to mention she'd just seen Knox with Jenny Anderson which surely meant Knox had asked Jenny to be his date.

That settled it. Willa wasn't going to this damn wedding alone.

She cleared her throat. "Wes, I know we just met and I know this is going to sound crazy but...Would you come to my sister's wedding with me on Saturday?"

"You mean, as your date?"

He was going to say no. Willa could feel it. The way he said the word *date*. Like he'd found a bone in his bite of fish.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable thud of rejection. Who was she kidding to think she deserved one nice thing after all the trouble she'd made for everyone else?

"I'd love to."

She straightened, blinking at the dashboard as if she'd misheard. "Really?"

"Really. It wasn't a trick question, was it?"

"No," she said, laughing. "No, it was real."

"Good. What time should I pick you up?"

"The ceremony starts at four so two would be perfect."

"Should I wear a suit?"

"A coat and tie is fine."

A beep signaled another call coming in; Willa glanced at the screen, seeing Thea's name. Her bubble of elation deflated. Just what she needed: another lecture. She asked Wes if she could call him back and switched over.

"Thee, if this is about how awful I am, I really can't take—"

"Will, shut up and listen," Thea said sharply. "Mom just called. Peach fainted during a meeting with the florist. She's at the hospital."

Willa froze, panic shooting up her spine. "I'm on my way."



# Chapter Ten

Brady's pale face was the first one that Willa saw when she stepped into Magnolia Bay's Urgent Care waiting room. The lack of color in his skin tone made Willa certain Peach's condition had to be dire.

Fortunately, her mother rushed to meet her with better news. "Peach is going to be fine," said Lily. "The doctor says it's just stress. They're running some tests to be sure, but he's not worried."

"Thank God," said Willa, looking around the sun-filled room. Her father, Connie, and Thea sat in a short row of upholstered chairs by the window. Willa offered the group a weak wave, but only her father returned it.

Willa turned back to her mother. "Can we see her?"

"In a bit." Lily glanced over at Brady who was pacing in front of the door with his head down.

"For the sake of the carpet, they should really let Brady in first," Willa whispered.

Lily sighed. "I feel worse for him than Peach, honestly. But I suppose he'll have to get used to this sort of thing if he plans to marry your sister."

Knowing Peach was out of danger, Willa shifted her thoughts to Jay's vow to win Connie back. Had he gone to the office with flowers as he'd promised and found it closed? Should she call him and let him know what had happened?

No. She'd done enough meddling for one day. Jay would find Connie and everything would work out in time for the wedding.

"Is it me, or is it a little chilly in here?" Lily asked, nodding to the group at the window.

Willa gave her mother a knowing look. "Just say it and get it over with."

Lily held up her hands. "Say what?"

"I blew our bargain and you think it's my fault Peach is here."

"Oh good grief, don't be ridiculous. Peach is here because she's an

overwrought young woman who thrives on high drama and doesn't eat enough."

"Maybe so." Willa eyed her mother, her time in the confession box not yet over. "I suppose you know about the bet, too?"

Her mother's eyes were admonishing but soft. "Really, Willa. Won't you ever learn?"

"It's doubtful." A smile teased at Willa's lips; she forced it down. "I've met someone."

Lily searched her daughter's face. "And...?"

"He works with Thea. He's an attorney." The smile Willa had been trying to contain slipped out in full. "And he's so cute I can hardly stand it."

Lily grinned. "That is the best kind of cute. And he likes you too?"

"Yes. Even though I'm not sure I deserve to be liked right now."

"Oh, stop that. You're hardly the wicked witch of the West."

"No, I'm the wicked witch of the *South*."

Lily laughed and Willa fell against her mother's side.

"Maybe you'll ask him to the wedding," Lily said.

Willa smiled. "Maybe I already did."

"Is this girls-only, or can I crash the party?" Hugh arrived and slid in between his wife and daughter, wrapping his arms around each woman and pulling her close.

"Hey, Daddy," Willa said, snuggling against his collar.

"Your baby sister gave us all quite a scare, huh?" he asked, kissing Willa's temple.

Willa nodded, leaning back, suddenly parched. "I could really use a drink," she said, glancing around the room.

"There's a soda machine by the elevator," said her father.

\* \* \*

Hugh and Lily watched their daughter walk down the corridor and disappear around the corner.

Lily blew out a weary breath.

"Everything okay?" Hugh asked.

"Depends by what you mean by okay," said Lily. "Now that Peach is right as rain, I wish I could same the same for the rest of your daughters."

"They're your daughters, too, you know," Hugh teased.

"As if I could ever forget it."

"I was proud of you last night, Lil. You swallowed your pride for the sake of our daughter's future."

"I'm sorry Davis Loveless is such a blockhead."

"I'm not," Hugh said, grinning. "If he wasn't, you might never have run away from him and fallen in love with me."

\* \* \*

Willa drained half her Coke in one sip. All around her, the lobby bustled with staff and visitors, patients coming and patients going. Faces wearing



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dread and fear, others relief and joy. Her family was one of the lucky ones, she thought, watching a couple come in with drawn expressions. A fresh burst of shame filled her. She'd been such a fool.

"Meen?"

She spun to the voice and saw Knox striding down the hall, looking uncharacteristically rumpled in a denim shirt and canvas work pants, the legs streaked with dirt.

She rolled back her shoulders and raised her chin. *Whatever you do, don't mention the kiss*, she told herself as he approached. *He's going to the wedding with Jenny Anderson so don't, for the love of God, don't, mention the kiss.*

"I just heard about Peach," he said. "I came to see if she's okay."

"She's fine. Did you talk to Brady?"

"I tried to but he's like a zombie," Knox said, nodding to the end of the hall. "I'm honestly surprised they haven't admitted him too. He looks like he's about to have a heart attack."

"He really *is* crazy about her, isn't he?"

Knox gave her a bemused look, his brow wrinkling. "You doubted it?"

Willa shrugged.

"Did the doctors say why she fainted?"

"Stress. Peach got herself so worked up. And I'm afraid I didn't help matters." Willa glanced at Knox, just wanting to get it over with. "Congratulations, by the way."

"For what?"

"Winning the bet." She stepped to the window and looked out at the parking lot, the fronds of the palms that trimmed its perimeter swaying gently. "Connie chose Jay and he wants to be her date for the wedding. So you won."

"Oh."

*Ob?* Knox wasn't honestly going to act as if he didn't know that Jay and Connie were an item, as if he hadn't done his part to put them together...*was he?*

Willa turned to meet his gaze, steeling herself for the unbearable gloating and self-satisfaction that would surely be flashing back at her, but in his deep brown eyes she saw only warmth.

Why wasn't he rubbing this in?

She returned her study to the view, deciding it didn't matter now. Two out of three of her sisters weren't speaking to her and the third...well, it was only a matter of time before Thea found a reason to cut her off too.

Willa bit the inside of her cheek, fighting back tears.

"Meen...you okay?"

Willa shook her head. "I'm a selfish, sorry excuse for a sister."

"You're a lot more than that."

"Oh Gee, thanks," she said, sniffing. "Pile it on, why don't you?"

"You didn't let me finish." Knox took a step closer. "You're also fiercely


loyal and frighteningly smart and, on occasion, the kind of beautiful that makes a guy want to slay a dragon or chop down a tree or whatever dumb thing guys do when they can't say what it is they're feeling..." He smiled. "But yeah, sometimes you're that other stuff, too."

Willa stared up at him, speechless.

Knox reached out to push a loose tendril off her check and tethered it behind her ear. "I'll see you, Meen."

Only when he'd disappeared down the hall, the sensation of his touch still warm on her skin, did Willa's voice finally return to her.

"See you, Knox," she whispered.



*We Heartily Request  
The pleasure of your company  
At the marriage of*

*Peach Marisol Dunn  
and  
Brady Edward Loveless*

*Saturday, June 16  
at 5:00 pm*

*Cotton Dock House  
Boone Hall Plantation*



*Dinner and dancing to follow the ceremony*



# Chapter Eleven

Despite all her worrying and fussing and fainting, Peach Dunn-almost-Loveless was about to be married on the prettiest day Magnolia Bay had seen all summer. A blanket of flawless blue covered the sky and without a single cloud, the air was unseasonably dry.

In his kitchen, Hugh Dunn endured a bow-tie check. “All that drama,” he said, “and Peach is going to have the most beautiful weather on record.”

“Hush,” scolded Connie, giving the knot a final twist. “You’ll jinx it.”

“Oh Lord, not you too,” said Thea, rolling her eyes from her seat at the table, a mug of coffee balanced between her palms.

Willa watched the scene from the doorway to the deck and couldn’t stop smiling. While Connie had yet to grant her forgiveness—much less speak more than two words to her—Willa knew her sister’s spirits soared. Jay Preston had arrived early and agreed to wait for Connie at Boone Hall, where the wedding would take place in a few hours.

Wes Carson, however, hadn’t proved himself to be nearly as eager. In fact, his lack of arrival was starting to concern Willa. He’d agreed to two o’clock but now it was nearly three and prickles of panic were dancing at her throat. Where could he be? At two-thirty, she’d put in a call—a gentle reminder—but he’d not picked up. She’d followed fifteen minutes later with a text—still no response. Another few minutes, and she’d have to meet him at the ceremony.

Thea rose from her seat and approached. “Any word from Wes?”

Willa wrinkled her lips.

“I take it that’s a no,” said Thea.

Wanting privacy, Willa nodded to the deck and Thea followed her outside, closing the French door to the kitchen behind her. “I’m sure he’s on his way,” said Thea. “Probably just stuck in traffic somewhere with lousy reception.”

"Probably," Willa said, trying to ignore that Thea had used the same sugary tone to explain why Cord Watson had been seen pulling out of Melissa Osborne's apartment at seven o'clock in the morning.

"Looks like all's forgiven between you and Con, though," Thea said.

Willa smiled, grateful for the subject change. "I don't know about that, but at least she's agreeing to be in the same *room* with me, which is more than I could say yesterday."

Thea put her arm around Willa and hugged her close. "Sorry, sweetie."

Willa shrugged. "It's just a house."

Thea gave her a leveled look. "Unless it's not."

"What is that supposed to mean? You know how much I love that house."

"And Knox knows it too, Will."

"Which is exactly why he knew he could twist the knife with this stupid bet."

"Are you sure that's what he's doing?" Thea asked.

Willa stepped back to meet Thea's questioning gaze. "What else would he be doing?"

"Come on, Will. Open your eyes. Everyone else can see it."

*See what?* Willa might have asked, but something in her sister's hazel eyes flashed intently enough that she swallowed the question.

The French door swung open; their father popped out with a smile.

"Peach just called," he said. "They're ready."

\* \* \*

The last time Knox had seen his older brother this nervous, Magnolia Bay High had been in the State Championship, there were fifteen seconds left on the clock and the Pirates were at third and goal. The only difference, of course, was that day Brady had been wearing a helmet and jersey; today he wore a three-piece suit.

"Think he'll make it to the ceremony?" Justin asked, coming up alongside Knox where he stood on the porch, watching their brother pace the lawn in front of the family's sprawling Queen Anne.

"Oh, he'll make it," said Knox.

Justin snickered. "Wanna bet?"

Knox's smile thinned. He moved to the railing and leaned on it, lifting his eyes to the view of the bay, a treasured vista afforded to all the grand homes that sat along the curve of Bayshore Drive. "No thanks," he said ruefully. "I think I've made enough of those lately."

"I heard. Jay mentioned something about a bet with Willa for the bungalow—what's all that about?"

Knox shook his head. "It's not worth explaining." He turned and looked to the other end of the wrap-around porch where Nicole was helping their Aunt Agnes with her corsage. "Nicole looks great. You tell her about your plan, yet?"

Justin smiled. "Last night."



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"No wonder she looks so damn happy." Knox grinned. "Good luck not stealing a little thunder today. Guests are going to need sunglasses to spare their eyes from the glow of you two."

"Speaking of couples," said Justin, "I still don't get why you're not bringing a date. Since when do you turn down the chance to wine and dine a beautiful woman?"

Knox had been asking himself the same thing all morning.

It wasn't as if he hadn't planned to bring a date. When he'd asked Jenny Anderson to meet him for lunch, he'd had every intention of asking her to the wedding, and when he'd stepped into Crusoe's and seen her sitting at the window, the sun inflaming her blond hair, gilding each shiny strand, he'd been more committed than ever to the invitation.

Then, the damndest thing had happened: He'd started talking to her.

It wasn't as if he'd never exchanged words with Jenny. Several times over the years they'd gone out and had fun, easy dates; breezy nights, a few of which had turned into early mornings, and he'd enjoyed Jenny thoroughly. Parting ways with her at the Preston job site, he'd felt bad, unable to offer her the promise of "a next time" when there always used to be a next time.

Until there wasn't.

Because recently something in him had clicked, or snapped, or whatever you wanted to call it. A craving for the company of one woman, and suddenly every other woman felt like a consolation prize, a stand-in.

What he couldn't tell Justin, what Knox wasn't sure he could tell anybody, was that if he couldn't take Willa Dunn to this wedding, then he wasn't interested in taking anyone else.

"The Hummer should be here any minute," Justin said, moving the sleeve of his suit jacket to glance at his watch. "I still can't believe he reserved a limo. They're so damn big."

"Our father doesn't do anything small, Jus. You know that."

"If Mom was here, she would've sooner walked than get in something like that."

"If Mom was here," Knox said, putting an arm around his brother and steering them both down the steps, "Dad would have walked with her."

\* \* \*

For as long as any of the sisters could remember, it had been Peach's dream to be married at Boone Hall Plantation.

Now as Willa and the rest of the Dunn family drove down the alley of live oaks that led to the Plantation, Willa teared up to see the main house and the view of the creek beyond it, filled at once with a pure and engulfing affection. Despite all the nonsense and foolishness she had allowed to overshadow this festive time, today her baby sister's dream was finally coming true.

They parked and walked across the lawn to the Cotton Dock House, passing the covered platform along the creek bank where the ceremony would take place in less than an hour, tidy rows of white folding chairs that

would soon hold friends and family.

Inside the barn-like Cotton Dock House, Willa found her mother flitting around the huge open room, Lily Dunn somehow still looking fresh even after being at the site to help set up since nine that morning.

Willa looked around at the delicate strings of miniature paper lanterns that had been wound around the dock's rustic beams, the long trestle tables covered in sparkling votives and wreaths of dried heather.

"It's pure magic, Mom."

"Let's hope Peach thinks so. She's still in the dressing room." Lily looked behind her. "Where's Mr. Cute?"

"On his way," Willa said as cheerfully as she could, though she suspected that her hopeful smile was showing cracks.

"She'd love to see you, sweetie," Lily said.

"But surely I can help you here?"

"Nothing left to do." Her mother reached over and kissed her cheek, a gesture as absolving as any words. "Now go."

\* \* \*

When Willa stepped into the dressing room and saw her baby sister in her gown, lit up and laughing and pink-cheeked with euphoria, Willa felt a fierce pang of love. No matter her feelings about Brady Loveless becoming her brother-in-law, Willa wanted nothing more than to see Peach glow this way for the rest of her life. Peach's other three bridesmaids were there too, taking pictures and sipping glasses of white wine. Peach spotted Willa and rushed to meet her in the doorway.

"You're not gonna fuss at me about the shrimp and grits in the tartlets too, are you?" Peach said. "Because there was no other way to serve them—"

"I'm not here to fuss," said Willa. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry and that I love you and that I don't think you could look more beautiful or more happy if you tried."

Peach bit at her lip, her eyes filling. "You're just saying that to ruin my make-up before the ceremony, aren't you?"

Willa smiled, tears blurring her gaze too. "Damn right," she said, pulling Peach in for a tight hug. A cell phone alert chimed.

"That must be yours," said Peach. "Brady took mine away from me yesterday when I wouldn't stop posting pictures of my wedding shoes on Facebook."

Willa laughed as she reached into her purse. "And y'all still wonder why I refuse to sign up?"

"By the way," Peach said. "You're walking down with Knox. It was either him or his uncle Teddy."

Pulling out her cell and seeing a text from Wes, relief soared. A text meant he was on his way, he was running late, maybe even a little lost, but he was most certainly—

Not coming.

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Willa reread the text a second time, as if there was a chance she'd misunderstood the handful of words.

*Hate myself for doing this to you, but something came up for work. Bet it'll be a great time. So, so sorry. W.*

W? Out of all the things to be angry about in his blow-off text, Willa found herself most annoyed by his parting initial. As if they were so close, they only went by one letter—or was it that he didn't even want to be bothered signing the other two letters?

*Was she not even worth two more letters?*

Swallowing the lump of tears that suddenly choked her, Willa deleted the message immediately and stared at her phone for a long minute before she could manage to move. Dazed, she wandered out of the dressing room and made her way to one of the tables.

Thea arrived beside her. "What's wrong?"

"Wes isn't coming," Willa said. "He sent me a text a few minutes ago."

"A text? What kind of creep bails on a wedding date with a text?"

"Apparently, Mr. Perfect isn't as perfect as we thought."

"Oh, sweetie. I'm sorry," said Thea, putting an arm around Willa. "And if being a Class-A jerk to my sister was a fire-able offense, I would have him booted from the firm *tonight*."

Willa shrugged. "At least now I don't have to worry about having food stuck between my teeth or sucking in my stomach every second, right?"

"There is that." Thea's gaze caught on the view through the opened barn doors behind them. "Looks like the other half just arrived."

Willa turned to see all the Loveless men crossing the lawn toward the Cotton Dock House, Knox and Justin in the lead. She wiped her eyes with two quick swipes of her fingers. The last thing she needed was Knox Loveless seeing her stood up *and* crying about it.

And God, as if things weren't bad enough, he looked so ridiculously handsome it actually hurt to look at him.

"I better find Mom," said Thea. "Will you be okay?"

Willa forced a convincing smile and Thea moved to greet the onslaught of Loveless men who poured in, loud and laughing.

Willa spun to the table and started to fuss with the flower arrangements that didn't need it, desperate to appear busy when Knox arrived.

He came beside her, close enough that she could feel the heat of his body, could smell the warm, grassy scent of his aftershave. She kept her eyes on the collection of peonies and sweet pea.

"You look way too beautiful to be priming flowers," Knox said.

Willa shot him a suspicious look. "Did Thea put you up to that?"

"I haven't seen Thea," he said. "I'm actually here to see you." He reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out an envelope, her full name written on the front. "I have something for you."

She glanced at the envelope and frowned, sure it had to be his completed

application for work on the bungalow.

Hurt bubbled up, that he would be thinking business at such a time.

"My hands are kind of full right now," she said, burying her fingers back into the blooms and squelching the urge to snap off the tops of every peony in the bunch.

"Then I'll just leave it here," Knox said, setting down the envelope and sliding it toward her. Willa could feel his gaze on her, knew he was waiting for her to say something more but she just wished he'd leave her to her humiliation in peace.

"Guess I'll see you down at the creek, Meen."

She nodded tightly, refusing to look at him. "Guess so."

She waited several moments before turning to see him back outside, headed for the covered platform where guests had already started filling the rows of seats. Willa supposed she should be grateful: at least he'd had enough sense and heart not to bring Jenny Anderson over with him. Where was Knox's date, anyway? Powdering her perfect cheekbones, no doubt.

Thea came toward her. "Peach wants us all down at the creek."

Willa nodded, giving her sister a stoic smile. "I'm ready."

"Looks like this is yours." Thea scooped up the envelope and handed it to Willa. For a brief moment, Willa considered tearing up the application without even opening it, letting the pieces of its contents be swept up on the soft breeze and watching them carried far away, but the bigger part of her knew the only thing more upsetting than Knox's ownership of the bungalow would be being called a litterer.

Instead, she shoved her finger under the seal and tore it open, glad for the loud, ripping sound. She began toward the opened barn doors, following her sister's path to the warm, welcoming sunlight, and pulled out the pages, deciding she would give the application a cursory look and leave it on a chair before she walked outside.

She was halfway across the floor when she stopped cold.

\* \* \*

In his last free minutes before the ceremony began, Knox took in a quiet view of the plantation's lane of live oaks.

Every bride and groom who married at Boone Hall Plantation would ask for the requisite photo along the famous Avenue of Oaks, the newlyweds' embracing figures dwarfed and shaded beneath the huge boughs of the old trees that dripped with curls of Spanish moss. Even now, a breeze from the creek tickled the pale green tendrils, giving them their beloved romantic and ghostly sway. Knox smiled up at the twisting strands, wishing yet again that their mother had lived to enjoy this day with them.

"Not thinking of cutting out, are you?" Justin crossed the drive to meet Knox where he rested against one of the enormous trunks.

"And miss the open bar? Are you nuts?" Knox nodded toward the platform. "Is it time?"



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"Almost. They sent me to come get you."

"Then lead the way." Knox pushed off the tree and clapped his hands clean.

"Oh, shit..." Justin chuckled. "Now what did you do to piss her off?"

Knox squinted to where Justin pointed. Across the lawn, Willa marched toward them, holding the frothy bulk of her peach skirt in one hand, papers in the other.

Justin patted his brother's arm. "You're on your own with this one. I'll see you at the dock."

Knox let his younger brother think rage was the reason for Willa's charge, but Knox knew it wasn't. He knew the real reason her face was so rosy, her eyes so fraught, and a surge of excitement bolted through him.

He couldn't think when he'd ever seen her look more beautiful.

\* \* \*

Knox had already spotted her, Willa realized. For the entirety of her walk across the grass and into the middle of the bough-canopied Avenue, his gaze followed her without wavering, so that by the time she reached him, he was wearing a confident smile.

But Willa wouldn't be waylaid. Not this time.

She thrust the papers at him. "What is this?"

"What's it look like?" Knox asked calmly.

"It looks like the deed to the bungalow," she said.

Knox smiled. "Then I guess it's the deed to the bungalow."

No, Willa thought. There was a trick here. There *had* to be a trick. When she'd opened the envelope and unfolded the pages inside, her head had fought her heart to accept the truth of what she'd found.

She lowered the papers to her side. "What's the catch?"

"There's no catch. I bought it for you," Knox said matter-of-factly. "Just like I said I would when I bet you couldn't break into it and you did, right through the damn window, and then I took you to the hospital because you cut your thigh on the glass."

And then stayed in the waiting room until her parents had showed up, Willa recalled. Knox had even called the house later that night to make sure she was all right. Twice.

She stared at him, still trying to grasp the enormity of his actions. Even though she held the deed in her hand, she couldn't quite believe it: the promise he'd made to her all those years ago, he'd kept it.

Knox had really given her the house.

The heat of joy, unexpected and pure, covered her, warming her skin like a fever.

"That's really where this all started, you know."

Willa blinked up at him. "All what?"

"This," Knox said, gesturing between them. "Us. This stupid game we started playing with each other and never stopped."

Was that true? Had everything really been decided that summer day fifteen years earlier? Willa looked at the live oaks that towered around them, as if they might offer an answer.

"Maybe this is my way of saying it's time we stop the game."

Willa let her gaze return to Knox's and searched his eyes, still not convinced. "If you meant for me to have the bungalow," she said carefully, "then why put me through all this foolishness?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't take it otherwise." He grinned. "Give me some credit here, Meen. I know you better than you think. You don't take handouts, especially from me."

"What makes you think I'll take it now? I still didn't win it fair or square."

"Neither did I; I can't take credit for winning a bet with a ringer. Your sister had already picked Jay the minute she laid eyes on him. She had that look."

"And what look is that?" Willa said.

"You know which look...or you *should*." Knox moved closer to her, so close that the tail of his jacket blew up against her hand. "I've been wearing the same look around *you* near my whole damn life, I suspect."

Willa felt as if someone had kicked her feet out from under her. The ground beneath her heels seemed to soften. She was sinking. She was certain of it.

She stepped back, terrified that if she didn't, she'd continue to sink. What was he saying? *How* was he saying it? He'd come here with someone else!

"But—but you're here with Jenny Anderson."

He frowned. "Who said?"

"I saw you with her the other day. Getting out of her car. And, you know, she has a *thing* for groomsmen, *remember?*"

"Yeah, but you see...I don't have a thing for *her*."

Knox took another step toward Willa, the same kind of step he'd taken at Teeny's, then again in the lounge at Sanctuary Hall. Purposeful, intentional, deliberate.

Willa put up her hands. "Now wait," she said. "Just wait. You can't do this."

"Do what?"

"You know damn well *what*!" she cried. "To one day decide you want to be with me and say all these things—ten minutes before my sister's wedding!"

"For the record, it's my brother's wedding, too."

"That's my point! Don't you think that's all a little too convenient?"

Knox squinted at her. "Convenient how?"

Good Lord, he could drive a person insane! Willa pushed past him, shaking her head. She slowed on the other side of the drive, feeling a safe distance between them again.

Why was he being so dense? For so many years, their exchanges had been built on strategy and competition, whether named or just implied, and she



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had been a willing opponent. What if her feelings for him in this moment, or any of the moments leading up to this one, were nothing more than another layer of that lifelong contest? After all their wagers, all their battles of wits, how could she trust his heart—let alone her own?

She stared at him helplessly. "It's just that all you and I seem to know is how to outdo each other, Knox. How do I know this isn't just another game?"

He studied her a long moment, his eyes darkening. "You don't."

"Exactly."

Confused and conflicted and just plain exhausted, Willa picked up her skirt and trudged off down the road, thinking there was one thing she *did* know: Peach's wedding was about to start, and she had a promise to keep.

\* \* \*

It had been a wickedly hot day in May, just shy of her fifteenth birthday, and Knox had been walking home when he caught Willa peering into the bungalow's window. She'd only meant to grab a quick look as was her ritual every time she'd pass the old house, just a peek from the sagging porch. But that day she'd been feeling especially reckless so she'd stacked a pair of cinderblocks along the side of the house and managed to climb high enough to see through one of the larger windows—and at exactly the same moment Knox Loveless happened by.

"You'll never get in that way," he called to her, startling Willa so she'd nearly fallen from her perch.

He'd come from swimming practice, his hair was slicked back, his t-shirt still damp enough to stick to the contours of his chest in places. Willa had seen him swim on occasion, seen how powerful he was, how easily he cut through the water. She knew he was a champion in freestyle relay—and she also knew he was a notorious flirt. Every girl in Magnolia Bay knew it. But Willa had decided early on that she wouldn't be joining the crowded ranks of his admirers.

"Who says I'm trying to get in?" She shot him a fierce glare, in no mood for a distraction. She pressed her face back to the glass, sure if she ignored him, he'd leave.

He didn't.

"Have you tried the door?" he asked, walking toward her.

"If I wanted to get into this house, I could," she said, still squinting in.

"Bet you can't."

Never able to refuse a challenge, especially not one that might give her the advantage, even for a moment, over the son of her parents' biggest competitor, Willa turned to Knox and said, "What do I get if I win?"

He grinned. "A date with me."

Willa rolled her eyes back to the window. "No deal."

She heard him chuckle below her. "Okay, then how about if you can get into this place without breaking even one pane of glass, I'll buy it for you."

Willa spun to face him. He was barely old enough to drive!

"You can't buy a house for me."

"Sure I can," Knox said. "I can do anything I want."

He probably could, Willa thought sourly. He was rich and handsome and obviously used to getting what he wanted, like all the Loveless men in Magnolia Bay.

"And if I *can't* get in?" she asked carefully.

"What does it matter? You said you were sure you could."

Willa narrowed her eyes. "Maybe I don't like making bets when I don't know the terms. Especially when it's a deal with a Loveless."

"Ouch." Knox clapped a hand over his chest and winced. "That really hurts."

Willa wanted to smile, laugh even, but she swallowed the urge. By then, it didn't matter. The challenge had been cast and in she would go, because one flash of Knox Loveless' deep brown eyes, one glimpse of that mischievous smile, and she'd have crossed the Grand Canyon on a line of dental floss if he'd bet she couldn't.

She hadn't even realized she was bleeding until he pointed out the red streaks down her leg a few minutes after they'd found themselves inside. Then she'd felt so weak she couldn't stand. It was the only reason Willa would ever have allowed him, or any boy, to carry her but she was too lightheaded to fight when Knox's arms came around her body and swept her up.

After that, Willa had let her head fall against his chest and thought how good and warm he'd smelled, of chlorine and mint soap, trying to focus on the powerful thrumming of his heart through his damp shirt instead of the growing pain of her wound.

\* \* \*

Throughout the entire ceremony, even as she let Knox's bent arm offer her escort down the aisle to stand in her sister's wedding party, or while she fought to keep her gaze away from Knox's throughout the exchange of the vows, then the rings, Willa thought about that summer day. She played it back like someone filming a movie, rethinking vantage points, peeling apart moments, dissecting details she might have overlooked.

*If you can get into this place without breaking even one pane of glass, I'll buy it for you...*

Knox was right. That day had shaped all the ones after it for the two of them. Since that outrageous break-in, they had been walking a foolish line in the sand. Who had drawn it in the first place?

Wasn't it obvious? They each had—to hide their feelings.

Why?

As she followed the wedding party across the lawn to the Cotton Dock House, Willa watched her baby sister and her new husband, arms linked, lead the way, glowing like a pair of candles. Peach had put aside their families'

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professional rivalry for the sake of something more important: true love. Willa had called her sister's choice selfish—but what was selfish about following your heart?

The Cotton Dock House filled quickly, voices rising with excitement, the warm, buttery smell of hors d'oeuvres, the clink of cocktail glasses filled with ice, goblets with wine, flutes with champagne. When dinner was announced, guests slid into their seats and feasted on grilled salmon and mushroom risotto. Toasts were made, childhood anecdotes were shared, and laughter was as plentiful as the bottles of wine that decorated every table. Afterward, when Davis Loveless had finally relinquished the floor after five toasts, the jazz band came to life, sending guests spilling into the clearing to dance.

Willa moved to the bar for another glass of wine and saw Connie a few feet away, picking up a pair of filled flutes. Her older sister spotted her and snaked through the crowd to meet her.

"Bet I know who gets the other one," Willa said, pointing to the champagne.

"You," said Connie, handing Willa the extra flute and gently tapping it with her own. "To family."

Willa returned the toast. "To family." She considered her glass a moment then said, "I really am so sorry I was such a jerk, Con."

"Don't be," Connie said, waving to someone over Willa's shoulder. Willa turned to see Jay talking to Justin on the edge of the dance floor. The men waved their way. "I *am* still angry with you, though," Connie said, bringing her flute to her lips and taking a small sip.

"For what?" Willa asked nervously.

"Because you look better than all of us in your dress."

Willa smiled. "Hardly."

"I'm not the only one who thinks so, apparently."

Willa turned once more to see where Connie looked, sure she'd find Justin and Jay again but instead her eyes locked on Knox who had come to join the men's conversation, his mouth moving in speech to his company but his eyes fixed on Willa.

Her breath caught.

"Told you," said Connie.

Willa looked back at Connie. "You'll never believe it: he gave me the bungalow anyway."

Willa watched her sister's face, waiting for it to shift with shock but it didn't.

Willa frowned at her. "You don't look surprised."

"*Will.*" Connie sighed with gentle exasperation. "I don't know how to tell you this, but the only two people in the entire universe who aren't up to speed on how stupid in love you and Knox are, are you and Knox."

Willa smiled at the words and the ease with which Connie had uttered them, as proof, as fact. Her sister had said what she, Willa, had been too

afraid to admit out loud. *In love*, two simple words that said everything.

"I know that's really why you've been so mad about this wedding," Connie went on. "You weren't angry at Peach, you were jealous. Because she admitted to falling in love with the Loveless man she wanted, and you couldn't let yourself do the same."

"Maybe," Willa said quietly, her gaze drifting back to Knox.

The band began a new song, something soft. Connie leaned in and gave her a hug. "I'm in the mood to dance. I think you should start filling up that dance card of yours too, little sister."

Willa watched Connie disappear into the crowd, headed for Jay who'd lost his company, and a flutter of excitement and possibility raced down Willa's neck.

She needed to find Knox.

\* \* \*

He found her first.

Willa had carried her champagne out to the lawn, wanting to see the glow of the Cotton Dock House from a distance, to hear the live music lifted on the breeze, and when she'd turned back to the creek, there he was, down to his vest, shirt sleeves rolled up, walking the platform with his hands in his pockets, waiting for her.

Had he been waiting for her all along?

Willa swore she could no longer feel her fingers or her toes as she crossed the grass to meet him. In her haste, her flute shivered and champagne spilled on her hand, down her wrist. She slowed only enough to drain the glass in one heady gulp, briefly seeing stars.

But the champagne wasn't to blame.

"Not in the mood for dancing?" she asked when she'd reached him.

He nodded toward the Dock House and said, "Everyone's crowded in there and there's this huge dance floor out here."

She smiled, not sure what to say next. It was unimaginable to her: For the first time in all their years of knowing one another, she was at a loss for words.

Thankfully the music filled the quiet.

He circled her where she stood. "So about the house..."

"Don't you even think about trying to take it back," Willa warned.

"I wouldn't." Knox stopped his tour and faced her. "I was just wondering when you planned on moving in."

"Not right away. It needs work."

"Maybe not as much as you think." He studied her a long moment. "We can do this, Meen."

"I know," she said. "I've helped restore plenty of houses before this one."

"I'm not talking about the house." Knox blew out a frustrated breath and walked past her to the edge of the platform, squinting out at the creek.

When he turned back to her, Willa met his eyes, her smile contrite. "I'm



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scared, Knox."

"You think I'm not?"

"Being with you is like the bungalow. It's something I've wanted for so long but now that it's here, now that it's mine, I'm terrified that I'm in over my head, that I don't have what it takes to make it livable, to do it right."

"So let's find out," Knox said firmly.

She blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You want to know if we can make this work, is that it? You're afraid of what's behind the walls? Then let's go rip off the plaster and get down to the studs and see what we're dealing with."

"Now?"

"Why not now?" he said, already turning for the lawn. "Hell, we won't even have to break in this time."

"No, sir—" Willa reached for him and caught his sleeve, stopping him. "You don't get to walk off again and leave me here like a blubbering school girl, Knox Loveless."

He walked back to her with that slow slide of a smile she'd watched forever. "Willa Dunn, you have never been a blubbering anything in your whole damn life and you know it."

She looked up at him, startled, incredulous. "You called me Willa."

"Isn't that your name?"

She smiled. "I happen to prefer Meen."

"Good." He scooped his hand under her cheek and pulled her up to his mouth, pausing a short, delicious second to meet her eyes, but before he could cover her mouth with his, Willa slipped her index finger against his lips.

"For the record," she whispered, "This time *I'm* kissing *you*."

He grinned. "For the record, I don't care."

She moved her finger just before the weight of his kiss came down on her lips and everything fell away. The feverish exploration they'd started earlier and had to cut short, now resumed, hungrier than before, their tongues teasing and tasting, all the years of longing and unspoken desire finally free.

When they parted, it was only out of necessity, needing air, but their noses and foreheads still touched, refusing to be uncoupled. Willa swallowed, trying to catch her breath. It was as if he'd chased her up and down the Avenue of Oaks.

"I've been thinking ..." Knox pulled in a ragged breath, winded too. "If we do this for real, we should probably agree to a draw."

"A draw?" Willa gave a playful pout. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Don't worry," Knox whispered huskily against her mouth, his thumbs riding the curves of her breasts and moving inward, searching for their hardened centers. "There are plenty of other games I plan to play with you..."

The band started a new song.

"Not so fast." Willa slipped from Knox's arms and smiled beckoningly at

him. "First, I want to dance."

"Then let's dance," he said, taking her hand and spinning her.

She landed against him and stared up into his eyes. "What if we screw this up?"

"We can't," he said. "And anyway, I've already broken the brown-eyed curse."

Willa wrinkled her lips. "What makes you think it was a curse?"

"Having to go twenty-nine years without being kissed properly by me? If that's not a curse, I don't know what is."

The music swelled and he dipped her backwards, lowering his face to hers.

"They'll be throwing the bouquet in a few minutes," Willa said, wiggling her brows. "I should warn you. I'm feeling lucky."

Knox narrowed his eyes, but Willa could still see the teasing glint of heat flashing back at her. "You wouldn't dare," he said, his voice low.

She smiled, taking the knot of his tie and tugging him down to her lips. "Want to bet?"

THE END



## About the Author



**Erika Marks** is a women's fiction writer and the author of *LITTLE GALE GUMBO*, *THE MERMAID COLLECTOR*, *THE GUEST HOUSE* and *IT COMES IN WAVES* (July, 2014). On the long and winding road to becoming published, she worked many different jobs, including carpenter, cake decorator, art director, and illustrator. But if pressed, she might say it was her brief tenure with a match-making service in Los Angeles after college that set her on the path to writing love stories (not that there isn't romance in frosting or power tools!) A native New Englander, she now makes her home in Charlotte, NC, with her husband, a native New Orleanian who has taught her to make a wicked gumbo, and their two little mermaids. For more on Erika's books, visit her website at

<http://www.erikamarksauthor.com>



Sweet Home  
Carolina

a magnolia bay romance

Kim Boykin

# Dedication

This book is dedicated to Erika Marks who makes this  
remarkable journey so much fun.

**Dear Reader,**

Welcome to the crown jewel of the South Carolina Lowcountry--Magnolia Bay, the perfect setting for Sweet Home Carolina's feisty heroine and hot southern hero. Author and fabulous gal pal, Erika Marks, and I have had a blast creating this tiny historical community just thirty miles north of Charleston.

Set in Magnolia Bay, Sweet Home Carolina is sass and seduction. It's moonlight and mimosa trees. It's blessing your heart one minute and making it beat out of your chest the next.

Want to know when the next book in the series will be out? LIKE our Magnolia Bay Facebook page to find out about new releases AND a contest for a fabulous girlfriend getaway to the Isle of Palms in the Charleston Lowcountry!

Thanks forever,

Kim Boykin

[www.facebook.com/pages/Magnolia-Bay](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Magnolia-Bay)





# Chapter One

The ancient clock that came with the house chimed the hour. As I shinnied down the ladder, I ran through the to-do list in my head—shower at ten, hair appointment at eleven, then back to the grind of turning Mimosa House into a stellar bed-and-breakfast. My brain counted the bongs as they reverberated off of the walls of my new lease on life that came with a seven-figure mortgage. *Nine. Ten. Eleven.* “Eleven? Shit.”

I stepped into my good flip-flops by the front door, the ones with hardly any paint on them, grabbed my purse and keys, and sprinted toward the Jeep.

“*Yankee.*” The hiss came from my lovely neighbor, Mr. Hunsucker, who was somewhere between five and a hundred and five years old and wasn’t at all happy I was opening a B&B. He was watering the prize roses he’d accused me of pilfering on more than one occasion. Okay, so when I thought no one was looking, I’d pulled a *spent* blossom off, just to smell it, which made me a flower thief *and* a Yankee.

“Good morning, Mr. Hunsucker,” I called and then ducked into the Jeep before the spray drenched my windshield. *Missed me.*

Looking up at him in my rearview mirror, he only held up his middle finger a few seconds this time. A new record. Yep, I was definitely growing on him. I glanced at my hair and tucked a stray strand behind my ear. Thanks to the unusually hot Low-Country spring and all my DIY renovations, I’d been aching to have it chopped off. As a matter of fact, the day the air conditioning went out in the money pit I’d been trying to turn into Magnolia Bay’s finest bed-and-breakfast, I came close to taking the kitchen shears to my waist-length red hair.

That horrific thought sent me searching through the Welcome Wagon basket one of the friendly residents dropped off six months ago, just after I moved into the beautiful little South Carolina town. I found the business card for The Sassy Scissors, requested an appointment with Rosie Mauldin, and

took the earliest one I could get.

Five after eleven, the Jeep came to a stop in front of the salon, and a jolt of adrenaline zinged through my body like a triple shot of espresso. Sure, I was a little buzzed from the fear of missing a hair appointment, but excited too about being around people for a change. I knew restoring Mimosa House to its former glory would be a lonely job, and when I ditched my corner office in the corporate world, I had actually looked forward to the solitude. But the first four months of renovations on Mimosa House, the Charlestonian mansion I'd sunk my life savings into, provided anything but. I'd hated having workers and contractors around all the time. Resented having to hire them to do the projects I couldn't tackle myself.

For the last eight weeks, I'd been cooped up in the house alone with a twenty-two page to-do list, painting mostly, perfecting. I'd missed having someone around to talk to, but didn't dare stop working long enough to make friends. Not when I had just a little over three weeks to get the house open for the Memorial Day weekend historic home tour.

Problem was, I couldn't get anyone on the Magnolia Bay Historical Society board to return my phone calls to find out when or if Mimosa House *would* be added to the tour. The house met all the historical requirements. But the society liked to pick and choose the history it sells to tourists from all over the world, and, as a former brothel, Mimosa House just wasn't their type.

Of course, I did my homework before I bought the property and knew there could be problems with the Bloom clan, the most prominent family in town. Magnolia Bay was founded in 1826 by Angus Crawford Bloom. Fast forward almost two centuries later, Violet Bloom and her two of her five daughters still ruled the town. They either weren't interested in preserving the inn's part of the town's history or they were too embarrassed about Violet's late husband Rembert's connection to the former brothel to acknowledge my requests.

I'd even marched myself up to Violet's daughters, Daisy and Camellia, at a Historical Society fundraiser a few weeks ago. Their tight smiles said they knew who I was and what I wanted, and that they had no intention of giving it to me. But I didn't back down. When they politely excused themselves from my company, I asked for an appointment to discuss getting the house on the town's historic registry.

Having the endorsement of the Magnolia Bay Preservation Society meant everything, especially to the tourists. It would put Mimosa House on the board's website, in their brochures. And their advertisements, something I had hoped to have some budget left for, but thanks to the four shiny new HVAC units, I had no money to spend on ads.

The sisters smiled their charming southern smiles and then gave me an appointment all right—next January. And that was it from the Bloom bitches. No pity for my dire situation, no discussion, just a wave of the hand to dismiss me like a peasant. Which was another good reason I dropped what

I was doing and ran out of the house five minutes ago. A long awaited audience with the eldest Bloom sister, Rosie.

I checked my look in the mirror. No paint spatters on my face or in my hair, although getting all of them out had taken a full hour and a quart of Duke's mayonnaise. I looked decent. Hardworking. Sure I had no makeup on, but I wasn't man hunting, not by a long shot. My outfit—*outfit*? Shit.

I'd been in such a rush, I'd forgotten to change out of my favorite paper-thin cutoffs that barely resembled denim anymore. Even worse, I was wearing my paint splattered *Yenz is right. Y'all is Stupid* T-shirt my brother sent me after he moved to Pittsburgh. I could turn it wrong side out, but then I'd look like I'd just stepped out of the back seat of a car. Or I could wear it as is and offend the entire southern half of the nation. I ducked down in the seat and flipped the shirt.

My knees gave a little as I pushed open the door and entered the sanctity of The Sassy Scissors. But it wasn't from desperation over my home or my hair. It was the same feeling I got when I walked into one of the neighborhood pubs back home in Chicago, friendly, welcoming. Belonging.

The place was large with six stations, although only three of them seemed to be occupied. I signed in at the front desk and took my place in the reception area. Across the room, a pretty, older woman looked up from the head full of foils she was working on and grinned. "Hi, I'm Rosie, and you much be Darcy."

Rosie Mauldin was the oldest of Violet Bloom's daughters, and by most people's standards, the least prominent. According to my research and bits and pieces of info from the workers who came and went from my house, Rosie owned the Sassy Scissors. She'd divorced Big Jack Mauldin ten years ago after he sold the family home so he could pay off his gambling debts. Not six months after the divorce was final, he hit the lottery, literally, and was set for life. Rosie wasn't rich, but as a hair stylist, I was betting she had some influence over the townspeople and hopefully her stuck-up sisters.

"Yes ma'am, sorry I'm late." Even after ten years south of the Mason-Dixon Line, the word ma'am sounded funny coming out of my mouth. Another custom I'd picked up when at Emory Law School in Atlanta.

Back home, whenever I slipped up and said yes ma'am to my mom, she'd quickly remind me that west of the Mississippi River, ma'am is for old ladies.

"I'll be with you in about ten minutes, sugar," Rosie said.

Two women under the dryer laughed and talked while their color processed. A younger stylist with white-blonde hair and eggplant purple streaks was chatting up her customer while she shaped her chestnut-colored bob. The laughter, the gossip, the estrogen-filled room were just what I needed, and for the first time in weeks, I didn't feel so frazzled, so lonely.

"Thanks, Rosie. No rush." I picked a *People* magazine off a stack, and started flipping through the pages. Whether I could talk Rosie Bloom into helping my cause or not, one thing was for sure, it was high time for a little

pampering.

A woman under the dryer pointed at the magazine I was reading and raised the hood a little. "Good Lord, Rosie, you've still got the *People* with Kate's baby bump on the cover? Honey, that shrimp boat's done sailed."

"Hush, Bernice, and put that hood back down or your color's going to take forever to process," Rosie snapped playfully. "Besides, I *love* that cover. Her and William look so happy, downright sweet, and Kate's hair always looks fabulous."

Bernice lowered the hood. "Well this girl's obviously new to Magnolia Bay, and I don't want her getting the idea that we're old hat."

I smiled and kept flipping the pages of the old magazine. One of the things I loved most about Magnolia Bay was its rich history. It was the reason I'd bought and renovated the stately old mansion on Bayshore Drive. I'd looked into homes in historic Charleston and Savannah, but couldn't afford anything big enough to turn into a profitable bed-and-breakfast. As it was, the renovations had cost more than twice the amount I'd planned, and if things didn't pan out—I couldn't let myself think like that.

Funny thing about a house like Mimosa House, good sense would tell anyone else to cut their losses, go back to practicing law in the big corner office, and being miserable. At least I could afford food and shoes, really great shoes. But it turns out buying a house like mine makes you a gambler, willing to double down at every freaking opportunity until you're on whatever is ten times smaller than a shoestring budget. But there wouldn't be much point in even opening the doors if I couldn't get the Historical Society's stamp of approval.

"Well, I don't give a hoot in hell about the royals." The old woman under the dryer beside Bernice piped up. "But every time I see a picture of that baby, they have him in a dress. I think that's fine for the christening, but a little boy, even a little king ought to dress like a boy."

"Ida," Bernice huffed. "For the hundredth time, putting your grandson in a dress didn't make him gay. Folks either are or they aren't; you got to let that one go, honey."

"It *confuses* the hell out of those babies," the old woman said. "I'm sure of it."

"He's a *baaaaby*, Ida. For God's sake, just let the gay thing go."

"Darcy, don't pay them any mind," Rosie said. "Ida and Bernice are sisters; they're always like that."

Before I could reply, the front door opened and my breath caught a little. Trouble walked into the salon. Tall, broad-shouldered, shirtless, and gorgeous, he pushed his dirty blond hair away from dangerous green eyes and plopped down in the chair of one of the vacant stations. I wanted to smack myself for gawking, but I wasn't the only woman in the room staring at him, even Bernice and Ida's faces were flushed like young girls'.

"Trenton James Mauldin, I raised you better," Rosie fussed. "You better



put your shirt on this minute.”

*Please. Don't.* I shook the thought out of my head. I couldn't afford such a pretty distraction, not even a little bit. *But it doesn't cost anything to look. Right?* Wrong. It costs a lot to look, at least it did last time I let myself feel all fluttery at the sight of a pretty face. *The* pretty face, and the reason I'd sworn off men. For good.

“It's hot outside.” Tiny beads of sweat trailed down the guy's chest toward the narrow planes of his belly. *Holy hell.*

“This minute!” Rosie punctuated the order with her rattail comb.

“My hair won't stay out of my face and it's driving me nuts.” He pulled on his damp T-shirt that clung to abs that I was reasonably sure were airbrushed. “Can you buzz it for me? Now?”

*Nooooooooooooo.* What the hell was wrong with me? What did I care what this guy did? My heart was taken; I was completely in love with a house. Mind, body, and bank account.

“I am *not* going to buzz your hair,” Rosie said. “And you know good and well that you have to wait for an appointment just like anybody else.”

He picked up a set of clippers and turned them on. “It can't be that hard.” When Rosie jerked the clippers away, he glanced up in the mirror and caught me gaping at him. The hard blush felt like my face was on fire. He smiled and turned the chair to face me.

Well aware that the *Huffington Post* declared Charleston as America's city with the most beautiful people, it was no surprise that platitude spilled over the Low Country into Magnolia Bay. And whoever handed out that honor, was obviously looking at this guy. The hem of his T-shirt ended just above his jeans to show a sliver of his tanned belly and a dusting of hair.

“I bet this pretty lady would give me her appointment.”

All I wanted was a little pampering, a new hairdo, and an audience with Rosie Mauldin. That's it. I couldn't afford a hot guy distracting me from my mission. But *damn*, what a distraction. “Dalton Prichard.” I whispered the snake's name to remind me of the first and last time I felt this kind of toe curling attraction. Amazing how two little words always reined in my libido from a blinding gallop to a slow trot. Don't get me wrong, the guy in the chair was still smoking hot, but I'd learned my lesson. Wasn't interested. Not even a little bit.

“You can turn the charm off, Trent,” Rosie fussed. “You're not taking anybody's appointment, and you're sure as heck not buzzing your own hair.”

Glancing up through my lashes, I saw him cock his head to the side and turn on his megawatt charm as he hauled himself out of the chair and sauntered toward me.

“Dalton Prichard. Dalton Prichard. Dalton Prichard.” Usually, just the thought of the snake was the Darcy equivalent of a guy willing himself soft by thinking of his ugly tenth-grade geometry teacher. But my words were powerless over Hot Guy's smile. “Dalton Pri— Dalton. Dal—” I snapped

my mouth shut and clamped my teeth down over my lips.

What was wrong with me? I'd spent the last eight years as the golden child of one of the biggest law firms in the southeast. Prosecutors called me, among other things, the Dragon Lady, and I'd perfected the look that had been known to have my opponents pee the front of their expensive tailor-made suits. Everyone except Dalton. Where was the Dragon Lady when I needed her?

Maybe I was a little crazy because I'd gone two hundred and sixty-five and a half days without sex. Not that Hot Guy was offering it up right here in the salon, but I was no stranger to that highly interested look in his insanely green eyes. I knew if I raised my head and looked at this gorgeous dirty man, I'd give him anything he wanted. So I stared hard at the magazine in my lap and flipped the pages.

"Your shirt's on wrong side out," he whispered.

"On purpose." Thank you very much. You can move along now.

"Really?"

"Really."

"It's kind of hot."

Great. So I did look like I'd just crawled out of the back seat of a car.

My long Katniss Everdeen braid hung over the front of my shoulder and stretched almost to my waist. I turned the last page of the magazine and stared down at the back cover at a Calvin Klein underwear model who looked woefully inadequate compared to this guy.

He lifted the braid so that it slid slowly across my breast. My belly tightened as he coiled the thick red lock around his hand and studied it. "You don't need an appointment. Your hair is perfect the way it is." He spoke loud enough for only me to hear.

"Trent, leave that poor girl alone," Rosie hollered from across the salon.

It was bad enough I was wearing holey cutoffs, and the inside out shirt thing didn't help. How would I look to Rosie if she saw me drooling over her son? I called on my inner Dragon Lady and steeled myself against his charms with my best haughty look. Normally my pulse would slow to a reptilian level, but I must have been a little rusty because my heart was beating out of my chest and my face was on fire from his *hot* comment. "Maybe I came in to get *my* hair buzzed."

For a split second, his eyes went wide and that smirk left his face before he let the braid fall back over my breast. "Not a chance."

"You should listen to your mother." I flipped my hair over my shoulder. "Besides, I'm not interested in you."

He had flecks of gold in those green eyes, and that smirk returned as a full grin that said his bullshit detector had gone off. Either that or my stupid nipples gave me away. "Let's start over, Darcy." He extended his hand. "I'm Trent Mauldin—"

"You left out the James. Trenton James Mauldin, sounds very southern."



Shit, I sounded sort of interested, which I wasn't.

"And you're not southern." His smile would be my undoing. He sat down in the wicker chair across from me, stretched his long legs, and crossed his ankles. Ancient jeans hugged his obscenely delicious hips. "But you have an accent. Wisconsin?"

"I do *not* have an accent." I picked up another magazine, the April edition of *Southern Living*. A good choice. Safe. No underwear models, just food, gardening, travel.

"Then you're from Chicago because everybody in Chicago swears they don't have an accent."

I refused to dignify his lucky guess with a response.

"I already know you're Darcy. You have a last name?"

"Vance." Still not looking. Not gonna look at him. *God, he's hot.*

"I haven't been back for a while, but I know you weren't in town when I came home last summer."

"Because you *know* everyone here?"

"Pretty much. It's a small town, but if we'd met I sure as hell wouldn't forget your face." I hated that I blushed again, hated even more when he laughed at my cheeks, which probably matched my hair. "So what are you doing after you get your hair done—not buzzed—Darcy?"

"Work." Oh, those eyes that smiled even when he didn't and that crooked grin. *Stop. Please. Stop.*

Was this what too many paint fumes and too much solitude did to a girl?

"*Dalton Prichard*," I hissed under my breath, trying to make myself stop feeling all quivery inside.

"Who's Dalton?"

"Nothing," I bit out. "No one."

"You're not real forthcoming and I'm trying to know you, Darcy." This guy turned flirting into an art form. "Help me out here. Where do you work?"

I caved for maybe five seconds and looked him over. So dirty. So gorgeous. So out of bounds.

"Bet you work in Charleston. Probably corporate. You in banking?" I shook my head and smiled at my broken nails, my hands that still had flecks of paint on them. I'd rather die than go back to the corporate world. "Law?"

Now that got my attention. "I'm just another B&B owner."

"Really? Which one?"

"Mimosa House."

"You should be proud. From what I've seen of the outside of the place, you've turned it into something special." His flirty tone wasn't gone, but he sounded interested. "It'll be a nice addition to the home tours."

Trent Mauldin was a pretty distraction from the reality that I was screwed if I couldn't get his mother, Rosie, to help me get my house on that damn tour. She seemed nice, really nice, but if I stopped being desperate for five seconds and looked at the situation, she was probably no match for her

sisters, and this guy was probably no match for the Bloom bitches either.

"The Historical Society Board is stonewalling my application." I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, hating the self-pity in my voice. But, with tourist season just weeks away, I was officially between a rock and a hard place. "As it stands now, my house won't be on the tour." Maybe I could survive for a few months with the spillover from the other B&Bs in town, but not for long. Maybe I would break down and borrow some money from my parents or, God forbid, my brother. But that would be akin to admitting failure, admitting that maybe leaving the cushy law partnership was a mistake, and I'd rather stick a fork in my eye.

"I might be able to help you with the board."

"Really?" My heart flipped over when he nodded. So much for being aloof. What if I had Rosie Mauldin *and* this guy in my corner?

But then I assessed Trenton James Mauldin like I would a potential witness. Sure he was serious eye candy, but was that enough to sway the Historical Society? The fact he was a blood relative, might count for something. But that mischievous look told me he probably wasn't Daisy and Camellia Bloom's favorite nephew. They were all about control and Trent Mauldin didn't look like the type to submit to anybody's control.

"Have dinner with me tonight, and I'll help you figure out how to get Aunt Daisy on your side; you get her, you get Aunt Camellia's vote. They've always been like that." That mischievous look again. "And if that doesn't work, my grandmother, Violet Bloom, trumps them all, but I'd look at her as a last resort if I were you."

He stopped talking. Eyes never leaving mine, slight smile. For eight years, I worked my butt off using my instincts, building an impressive track record in class action law, and while my body was screaming *yes* to this man. *Yes. Yes. Yes.* My brain said Trent Mauldin was a very pretty waste of time.

"That's very nice of you, but no. Thank you."

"No?" Obviously a word he didn't hear often. He smiled, almost laughed. "That's a shame, Darcy. Well, good luck. Whatever happens with your house, I'm on your side."

Rosie called me to her station. She didn't say anything about the way I was dressed, and I'd never been so grateful to have a plastic cape snapped around my neck in my life. Trent said goodbye to his mom and kissed her on the cheek. She waited about five seconds after the door closed behind him.

"I'm sorry, Darcy. He came into the world that way. Even as a baby all he had to do is smile and he had women all over him, and it's just gotten worse with age. And then with him being on the PGA tour with all those groupies."

"I didn't know golfers had groupies."

She nodded, totally engrossed in my hair. Her long slender fingers undid my braid and fanned my hair out across my shoulders. "Absolutely gorgeous." She looked at my reflection in the mirror, and suddenly remembered our conversation. "Oh, yeah, the groupies were awful. I got to

where I didn't go to the tournaments because it was kind of embarrassing. Not that he was encouraging them, but I'm smart enough to know he's a man and if he can use what God gave him, he will."

"Well, he ought to," Ida chimed in. "Can you imagine how pretty that man's babies would be? You match him up with my granddaughter Kelsey from Charleston, and Lord have mercy, that would be a pretty child."

"Ida. Stop talking about Trent like he's a prized bull," Rosie huffed.

"Just one baby," Ida shot back. "That's all I'm asking."

Rosie ignored her. "Now, back to you, Darcy. What do you want to do today? And before you say, I'm telling you straight up I'm not changing the color."

I smiled. Having hated my hair color for half my life, I learned to embrace my inner as well as my outer ginger when I was in college. "I'm good with the color, but I want it cut. Maybe to here." I held my hand just below my earlobes.

She ran her hands through my scalp and fluffed up the crown. Then she picked up handfuls of long strands and let them drop several times to see how my hair laid. "I don't do drastic. Janelle," she pointed to the woman with the eggplant streaks. "She does. But I've been fixing hair long enough to know that if I take the length of it off, you'll go out of here in tears. If you don't mind me asking, is this your first Low-Country summer?"

It was early May and hot and it wasn't even summer yet. I nodded.

"Here's what I'd do, and I'm not just saying this because I love Kate Middleton. I'd take six inches off, eight at the max so that you can wear it slightly layered and curled on the ends. It will be gorgeous, I guarandamntee it. Next month, if you want to go shorter, I'll do it, but I won't be happy about it."

"I'll cut you," Janelle said, looking at my hair like she was dying to chop it off as I had been the day the air conditioning went out. She took her scissors out of their sheath and snapped them open and closed a couple of times to punctuate the thought. "If you want to wait an hour while my next color is processing, I'll cut it as short as you want to go."

Janelle was kind of scary. "That's okay."

Rosie nodded and got started. She didn't talk much while she washed and combed out my hair. She reminded me to uncross my legs a couple of times while she was cutting it, but I felt like she wanted to say something else, she just didn't know how to begin. Her silence, made me put off the real reason I'd asked for an appointment with her in the first place.

True to her word, my hair was gorgeous, and I was grateful she hadn't cut it all off. I loved my hair, even when I hated being a redhead I loved my hair; it was thick and glossy, a gift from my mother.

Rosie took the cape off of me and smiled at my reflection. "You're a beautiful woman, Darcy Vance, but you've got a tough row to hoe."

She *did* know why I'd come. "I was hoping to talk to you about Mimosa

House—about your sisters—but I guess my time is up.”

“Honey, if I could have saved you from buying that house, I would have. I’ve lived in Magnolia Bay my whole life, and I don’t like the history of the place any more than my sisters do. But you’ve worked hard, made it beautiful again, I believe you have as much of a right as anybody to be part of the historical community, but that won’t make it so.”

“If I had any idea the house was so upsetting to your family...” If I truly realized the stranglehold your sisters had on the historical community. “I wouldn’t have bought the place, but I did. I’ve sunk everything I have into it, so I’m here. Groveling for your support.”

“I’ll talk to Daisy and Camilla, but it probably won’t amount to anything. Mama’s the key, if she’d see you, although I can almost promise you she won’t. But if you could change her mind, she’d make Daisy and Camilla do the right thing.”

“I’m so grateful for anything you can do to help, and I’m sorry if this is painful for you.”

“It’s not anymore, the history of your house is just that to me now.” She ran my credit card and gave me a little goodie bag with hair products. “I made my peace with that place a long time ago.”

“It’s been lovely to meet you, Rosie. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re a beautiful girl, Darcy Vance, inside and out. I’d love to see you stay in Magnolia Bay. From the looks of it, my son would too.”

## Chapter Two

Trent climbed into the truck and turned the air conditioner on full blast. Darcy Vance had turned him down. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had resisted his charm—and that made him want her all the more. And not just because she was gorgeous. He loved the fire behind those crystal blue eyes. He even loved her hair and knew there was no way his mom would cut it all off, at least he hoped she wouldn't. He punched a number into his cell phone and waited impatiently.

"Lord, I'm gonna to get a crick in my neck trying to hold this phone on my shoulder while I cut hair. I am working, honey. What do you want?"

"Hey, mom. I love you too."

"Well, you've never been the high maintenance one of the litter, and I hope you're not starting now. If you still want a haircut, I'll do it after I finish my last client, around seven."

"That'd be great, but I'm calling about Darcy." He closed his eyes and saw the perfect body she couldn't hide under cutoffs and an old T-shirt. Her braid wrapped around his hand. Long slender legs that went on for days. "You didn't really cut her hair off, did you?"

"And what would you say if I told you I did?"

"I'd say shit and then you'd get on to me about swearing. Again."

"Son, you can say shit all you want, just not to your mama. And no, I haven't done what you just said."

"I like her. And her hair. I even asked her out, but she turned me down."

"Obviously, you're forgetting that you are my persistent child. Now, ask and ye shall receive or just keep on asking until you get the right answer. I really have to go, sugar."

He ended the call and pulled the truck onto Main Street, headed for the Historical Society. Even with all the growth in the Low Country, Magnolia Bay still looked much the same as it did when he was a kid. The town was



draped around the mouth of the bay; the marina his brother, Dane, ran jutted out dead center of the bay. A dozen showy mansions, most of them built well before 1900, enjoyed the waterfront views of spring green marsh grass and the Atlantic. The shops and restaurants perched on Main Street had front-row views of the picturesque homes and bay that were every bit as beautiful as anyplace Trent had been during in his travels.

Violet Bloom's house sat on the north end of the exaggerated C shape of Bayshore Drive that followed the outline of the bay. On the opposite shore, jutting out a little further into the Atlantic, Darcy's Mimosa House stared at his grandmother's home, taunting, reminding Violet and the Bloom sisters there was some history they couldn't deny or sanitize.

Trent was glad his mom wasn't included in that bunch, glad she wasn't anything like her sisters Daisy and Camellia. She'd always been down to earth, generous to a fault, and an excellent judge of character, except where his father was concerned.

Main Street ended at the fork of Bayshore and Compton. On the bay side, Mimosa House stood gleaming in the afternoon sun. The house had been run down for so long, it was almost surreal to see it restored to its former glory. Darcy had put a ton of money into the place, especially the impressive entrance, an elaborate iron gate with thick stucco columns that opened to a long, red, cobbled driveway. The gate was new but blended well with the architecture of the old home.

He wondered how Darcy was going to take his father's plan to put Arcadia Dunes Resort right beside Mimosa House. Who knows? Maybe Darcy would even join forces with Camilla and Daisy to stop him. But the truth was, Big Jack couldn't be stopped. After he'd won the lottery, he and an investment group had bought all the property he could get his hands on—thirty-six hundred acres to be exact. The land hugged the county side of the southern city limit, and Big Jack planned to build a golf resort and community to rival nearby Wild Dunes and Kiawah resorts.

Before Trent had stopped by his mom's shop, he'd been out walking the bones of the golf course, to ensure the high-dollar asshole his father had hired to oversee the project was doing it right. Trent shook his head at the mess. He'd talk to Big Jack about it later, not that his father would listen.

A few minutes later Trent pulled into the parking lot of the Magnolia Bay Historical Society where his aunts held court from nine to five, guarding the town's history, or the history they wanted to protect. Their matching black Mercedes were parked in their reserved spaces. Daisy's had a University of South Carolina sticker in the center of the back window. Camellia's car had a Clemson University sticker in the exact same spot, the one thing the sisters differed on. And the only reason they did was Daisy's husband, Bo, had played quarterback for the South Carolina Gamecocks back in the early seventies, and Camellia's husband, Don, had been a backup placekicker for the Tigers around that same time.



Trent climbed the double staircase and opened the ornately carved front door. He didn't recognize the receptionist; she was round, maybe mid-fifties with black glasses. She eyed his dirty boots and clothes over the top of her thick frames, no smile. "May I help you?"

"Just stopping by to say hey to my aunts. Daisy and Camellia? I'm Trent, by the way." He extended his hand, but she declined, just nodding at him. "Are they in?"

"I'll see." She buzzed one of the offices and announced he was waiting in the lobby.

"Trent, darling!" Daisy flowed down the hallway until she saw him. She looked him over from head to toe and then gave him a distant air kiss. "And you're usually the well-dressed brother."

"Sorry. I've been doing some work for dad. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course." She nodded toward a conference room and he followed. "Camellia will be so disappointed she missed you; she's at a Sertoma function. Please. Sit." The words came out of her mouth, but Trent knew better than to sit on any of the antique chairs that probably cost more than a new set of golf clubs.

"That's okay. I'm a mess."

"So, how long have you been back home?" Her sympathetic tone said she knew he'd lost his PGA card.

"A few weeks." Four very long weeks to be exact.

Losing his card had made Trent feel like his guts had been ripped out, like every hope and dream he'd ever had been yanked. Dead and gone. He'd played golf at the University of South Carolina and then on one of the developmental tours until he got his card at twenty-six and was crowned the next wunderkind.

The first three years on the PGA tour were like a dream, the commentators called him the next big thing. Sponsors were falling all over themselves, throwing stupid money at him to promote their products. As exciting as that was, all that attention turned into demands, from fans, from the media, from sponsors. For a small-town Low-Country guy, what started out as heady had made him feel like everybody wanted a piece of him. Until he hurt his shoulder.

At first when some of the attention subsided, it was almost a relief. The plan was to have surgery, get back out on the tour, and do things a little differently. As his popularity had grown, he'd shut people out, even his family, and he'd intended to correct that. But his shoulder didn't get better. He had another surgery to correct the first one, but never recovered completely.

He got an exemption to play another year, and rehabbed like crazy, but he was relying on painkillers way more than felt comfortable and his game still wasn't any better. He even saw another orthopedist a lot of the guys on the tour swore by; the doc said he could fix Trent's shoulder, but rehab was a

bitch and meant more drugs. He'd already been through it twice and didn't know if he wanted to do it again. As bad as it was to lose his card, part of him was relieved. Thanks to his shoulder, competing at the highest level had become painful and hadn't been fun in a long time.

After doing some traveling alone and a lot of sulking, he didn't know what to do, so he came home to Magnolia Bay. He'd hung out with old friends at Bulls Bay Golf Club mostly, sometimes at Charleston Country Club or the one at Davis Island. After ten days of playing golf that didn't matter, he was glad when his dad offered him a job that was as temporary or as permanent as he wanted it to be.

"Well, I'm happy you're home, Trent," Daisy said. "I hear you're keeping busy."

"It's been interesting, working for Dad." That was an understatement.

The majority of the town wasn't on board with Big Jack's plans, but since the new development began on the border of the town, neither the politicians nor the Bloom family had any say in the development. Only county government was in control and most of those guys were in Big Jack's hip pocket.

"As you might guess, I'm not happy about your father's business venture, but we won't get into that now. How long are you staying?"

"I'm not sure." It seemed like the entire population of Magnolia Bay had asked him that question since he came home. Except for his father, who expected him to have quit and be gone by now. Trent reminded himself why he'd asked for an audience with his aunt and changed the conversation to her favorite subject. "You look really good. How are you doing?"

"Thanks, darling. Charity work and the Society keep me busy. Bo retired early, so, as you can imagine, I'm dealing with that."

Uncle Bo was smart and funny, a fireball. Trent couldn't picture Bo retired any more than he could picture himself retired. But he was. Retired. Washed up at thirty-six. What in the hell was he going to do now? Work for Big Jack the rest of his life? Hell, no wonder he was here, focusing on helping Darcy instead of himself. He didn't know who was he without golf? Without it, his life was too damn scary.

He picked up a paperweight-looking thing, a tarnished bird sitting on a dock post; it was stamped by the craftsman, James Crow Taylor, who hailed from Louisville, Kentucky in 1922. When Trent tossed it up in the air, Daisy sucked in a breath and stilled his hands before he could do it again. He saw fear in her eyes, but there was something else there too as she took paperweight away from him and placed it on the table.

After being hounded by sponsors and the media for seven years, Trent had developed a sixth sense of when someone wanted something, and Daisy wanted definitely did. "Sounds like Uncle Bo's wearing on you."

"He wants to go places with me. Shopping. Out to lunch. Even the grocery store. On good days it's annoying, on bad days, I want to strangle him." He

laughed, although his aunt seemed pretty serious. "So, what can I do for you, Trent?"

"I met Darcy Vance this morning." Aunt Daisy's stiff Botoxed brow furrowed. "Nice lady."

"I'm surprised at you, Trent. You've always had a thing for blondes." She shifted in her seat, recrossing her legs. "I suppose you didn't just stop by to see how your favorite aunt is doing." She punched the word to remind him that she was no more his favorite than he was hers.

"Darcy's place looks great, the new entrance is really impressive. Looks like she's protected the architectural integrity of the inn and then some. So, what's the holdup on her application to get the board's seal of approval?"

Aunt Daisy twirled a long strand of pearls around, contemplating her answer. "Are you asking me to revisit the board's decision?"

"I think it would be news to Darcy if there's been a decision. I'm asking you to lay aside your feelings for the house and look at it as objectively as you would any other building in town." *Do the right thing.*

She jutted her chin out like she'd read his mind. "I'll resubmit Miss Vance's application, but I want something in return."

Bingo. Trent folded his arms. "I'm listening."

"I want Bo to take up golf. Again."

Trent had given golfing lessons on and off since he was sixteen, and believed anyone could learn to play and enjoy the game. Except Uncle Bo.

"He hates golf."

"Well, he's going to learn to like it. Our thirty-fifth anniversary is Saturday and he's getting a new set of clubs."

"Why?"

"It's a lovely, social game. Fresh air, exercise, and all of that."

"But he really hates golf." Trent's tall lanky frame made him a better golfer, but Uncle Bo was built a little like T Rex, tall, with short muscular arms. He blamed his height on his lack of ability, but from what Trent had observed, Bo's lack of success had more to do with a lack of enthusiasm and a set of expensive, ill-fitted clubs. "How about tennis? I have some buddies at Wild Dunes who would be glad to take him on and coach him up."

"No. It has to be golf. "Trent almost smiled at how desperate she sounded. "It takes four or five hours to play eighteen holes, doesn't it?"

"Give or take."

"Starting as absolutely soon as possible, you give him lessons three times a week, and I'll present your friend's application at the next board meeting. Do we have a deal?"

"When's the next meeting?"

"A week from Thursday. It starts at seven and is an open meeting." She stood, his cue to leave. "I'm not promising this will change anything, Trent. Camellia and I aren't the only ones against that house. So will you teach Bo?"

"I'll do it, but I want to see the clubs to make sure they fit him properly,

his old ones didn't." Trent shook on it, although he liked Uncle Bo and would have given him lessons anyway. "And I'll be at the meeting to make sure you present the application." He'd get Darcy to go too; there's no way she'd turn down a date with the Historical Society board.

## Chapter Three

After six months of working like the desperate woman I was to get the house ready, I felt a little guilty after I left The Sassy Scissors—almost decadent. But instead of hurrying back to the house to hang those damn cornice boards I wished I hadn't ordered, I stopped into Bay City Beans and Bakery to have a celebratory coffee.

The brass plate beside the entrance said the building was relatively new for Magnolia Bay—1910. The bell over the cobalt blue door chimed as I entered the roomy store. I was assaulted by the scents of roasted coffee beans and cinnamon rolls that *Southern Living* magazine had declared the Holy Grail of all cinnamon rolls.

A guy who'd entered the coffee shop ahead of me walked to the counter, his cellphone glued to his ear, his face serious. He was tall, but not as tall as Trent, his hair was blonder than Trent's but not quite as thick. And his ass—

*What the hell was I doing, and why was Trent suddenly the gold standard?*

My mind replayed a very vivid picture show of Trent with his shirt off to remind me.

Jesus, when had my brain suddenly done a backflip from thirty-six to sixteen? No, I'd made a promise to myself. *No more men.*

"The usual?" the barista asked as the guy ended the call.

"Yeah," he said, "with an extra shot of espresso."

"Rough day?"

"We're short-handed," the guy said. "Too many days on call."

"Be with you in a sec," the barista said to me.

The guy smiled at me with sapphire blue eyes. Even I could see how tired he was. He took in my shorts and was too kind to say anything about my shirt still being wrong side out. "New in town or tourist?"

"Not a tourist." Although I prayed I'd see my fair share of them. "I bought Mimosa House about six months ago." He glanced down at my work worn



hands. *Nope. Not married, and not looking, buster.*

He nodded, the tiredness leaving his eyes a little, his smile still flirty. "I'm Conner Ritz." He extended his right hand. Okay, so I couldn't help but notice the ring finger on his left was naked. Even after swearing off men, my brain still automatically goes through the checklist —eyes, smile, build, and if he just so happens to be walking ahead of me, or is in front of me in the coffee line, ass. But it doesn't mean anything, it's just a habit, almost a reflex.

"Darcy Vance."

He shook my hand. "I live over on Spencer Road." A.k.a. *B&B Boulevard*.

"Are you my competition?" Actually there were twelve B&Bs of various sizes on the street, hence the B&B Boulevard moniker.

"Only if you're an anesthesiologist, and even then probably not. We're not a very competitive bunch, but those surgeons can be pretty cutthroat."

There's something dangerous about maintaining eye contact with a guy when you're in the throes of early conversational banter. Like you're putting yourself out there with a great big AVAILABLE sticker on your forehead. But I wasn't available. I was in love—with my house. Committed to my house—for good reason. A house doesn't lie or cheat on you. A house doesn't break your heart into a million pieces and make you eat brownie mix out of the box.

Scratch that. I knew Mimosa House was capable of breaking my heart. Especially if I ended up having to walk away from her and back to Atlanta.

"Good to know." I pulled out my wallet, ready to order.

"Your house is beautiful." He laughed when I blushed, and seemed to be making a mental note. *The way to this girl's heart—definitely through her house.* "I'd love to see the inside."

"Doc. Turning up the charm for the new girl?" The dark haired pixie-looking barista teased, pushing his drink across the counter. "What can I get for you?" She nodded at me. She looked to be about sixteen, but the stack of books behind the counter said she was in college.

"The largest caramel macchiato you have. Iced. With extra whipped cream and double caramel, please." She busied herself mixing and pouring, stirring, I was already salivating.

"Sweet tooth?" Connor smirked.

"Guilty, as charged." I laughed.

"I'll have to remember that. It was nice to meet you, Darcy Vance. Hope to see you again soon."

I watched him leave. For quality control purposes, just to make sure I had an accurate assessment of the locals. When I turned back, I caught the barista doing the same, or she caught me. We both laughed.

"So, you like Dr. Hottie?"

She blushed hard at my question. "Yes, but he's in a different category."

"What category would that be?"

"The I-have-a-boyfriend, but I-definitely-enjoy-the-view category. So, what's your excuse?" I didn't know anyone's eyebrows could raise that high.



"And this is where the customer is always right and changes the subject." She handed me the drink that I'm sure had more calories than a Big Mac and large fries—well, maybe just the sandwich and a small fries, but still. "How do you stay so slim working here?"

"Between my freshman year and working at this place, I put on fifteen pounds, but after four years, you get sick of sweets."

"Can't imagine that." She offered me a legendary cinnamon bun, but I opted for two red velvet cake pops.

"I'm Stacia," she said. She handed me the goodies and took my credit card.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Darcy."

Stacia nodded. "I know. You're the talk of the town, a kind of a mystery really since no one sees you around much. We all know you've been busy with the house, but if you're going to live here, you need to *live* here. Know what I mean?"

I was getting to that part as soon as I finished the house, but the truth was you never finished with a house like mine. Stacia was right, I needed to get out and meet people, join the community.

"Come to our book club tomorrow night at seven." She snatched a book off of her stack, holding up a copy of *War and Peace*. "There'll be women and wine."

Good, God. Really? I wasn't sure there was enough wine in the great state of South Carolina to make reading *that* classic *not* feel like a root canal. Why do book clubs do that to themselves, choose books nobody truly wants to read when there are a gazillion really good books that would be a blast to discuss over a glass of wine?

Stacia looked at the book and blushed. "Sorry. Wrong book." She handed me *The Good Woman*. "Even if you don't finish it, you should come, get to know some girls. It's good for business, and well, it's just good for you."

I stuck the Jane Porter novel in my bag and thanked Stacia. "So it's obvious that I'm a self-imposed hermit?"

"Yes, but don't worry. If books aren't your thing, we have live music here on Thursday nights. Sometimes my boyfriend plays, when he's not on the road with his band, he's really good." The look on her face said he was better than good, at least in her eyes. "Sawyer plays acoustic guitar and sings Jason Mraz kind of stuff."

Stacia handed back my card and probably wasn't aware of the dreamy look she still had from just saying her boyfriend's name. At first I attributed it to the well-known fact that chicks dig guitar players, but when she picked up her phone and saw a text message had come in, her huge grin said it wasn't the just the guitar. She was definitely in love.

I said goodbye to Stacia and headed back to the Jeep, munching on my cake pop. Had to admit, after spending my morning in a beauty salon with a bunch of women, and for a few minutes, a very hot guy, I wasn't craving alone time like I was when I first came to Magnolia Bay. And, if I was being

honest, I was the tiniest bit envious of Stacia.

With one recent disastrous exception, I hadn't been head over heels like Stacia since I was in high school. I'd dated in college and then when I worked for the firm, but I'd been too busy to pursue any kind of serious relationship until Dalton Pritchard swept me off my feet.

Me, the girl who had always been immune to feet sweeping had fallen for him hook, line, and sinker, and it had ended disastrously. My body tensed at the memory of me and the Dragon Lady in the same pajamas for two weeks. Holed up at my condo, eating brownie mix out of the box with a great big spoon, while every soul I knew, except Dalton, thought I was on some fabulous vacation.

Thankfully, my cell phone interrupted that lovely visual image, but I didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Darcy? It's Trent Mauldin." I was speechless that he'd called, considering he didn't have my number. When I didn't say anything, he laughed. "I'm not stalking you. I got your number off of the Mimosa House website."

As if he could see me, I glanced up in the rear view mirror and checked my look. "Sorry. I'm just surprised to hear from you." *Since I turned you down.* But after watching Stacia gush about her boyfriend, I had Christmas morning eyes and a stupid grin on my face.

Being around someone who's been bitten by the romance bug will do that to you. No matter how badly you've been burned, it can make you want what they have—in spades. Being a pragmatist, I knew the glow I had wouldn't last long. Still, I loved the way hearing his voice made my heart race, making me think romantic things. Naughty things.

"You still want your house on the home tour?"

Right now, I wanted him *and* my house on the home tour, mostly him. But I was good at playing it cool, and that's exactly what I needed to maintain with a guy like Trent who made me feel combustible. *Very. Cool.*

"Yes." *Hell, yes.*

"I talked my Aunt Daisy into presenting your application at the board meeting next Thursday night."

"*Oh, my God. Thank you, Trent.*" Well, so much for remaining low-key.

"I can't promise this will change anything, but at least you've got a chance to be heard."

"Thanks, Trent."

"I'd still like to take you out. Have dinner with me."

I pulled into the entrance of my house to see Abide-A-While Nursery had tilled my flowerbeds while I was gone and delivered thirty flats of begonias and vinca and a dozen other flowers whose names I didn't know. I had two more rooms to finish painting and those damn cornice boards to hang. I still didn't have time for Trent Mauldin. But he'd obviously given a kidney or some other major organ to get me an audience with the Bloom bitches and their minions. Still, Trent Mauldin was as pretty a distraction as he was the

last time I saw him.

I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to say the words. "Sorry, but no. I still have tons of stuff to do at the house."

"I'm a pretty handy guy; let me help you out." He laughed when I said no again. "So, what's a guy got to do to get a date with you?"

I thought about all the things that needed to be done before I could open the inn. "You don't want to know."

"Try me." I could hear the smirk in his voice.

Suddenly, visions of all the things I could do with Trent danced in my head, pure unadulterated DIY foreplay. Watching those incredibly powerful biceps rolling slick wet paint on my walls. Seeing him sprawled on my kitchen floor with his head under my sink that wouldn't stop leaking. If he really was handy, he'd have a tool belt for the rest of the honey-dos on my list, one that made his jeans sit even lower on his delicious hips. Maybe he could even hang those damn cornice boards.

After two months of solitude and believing I could finish the house myself, I was beyond panicked. There was too much to do before I could open. I was sick of doing everything all by myself, and couldn't afford to hire help; an extra pair of what I was hoping were very talented hands would be more than welcome. But not on a hot Low Country night with a full moon hanging over the bay, that wouldn't be wise. But the crack of dawn, might just prove how serious Trent was.

I'd be up and at 'em with a honey-do list that was long enough to hang myself on. There would be no time for hanky-panky. "Okay. How about six o'clock?"

"Great. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"In the morning."

Silence. Maybe crickets chirping in the background. Not what he was expecting. "Sure. Okay. Whatever you need, I'm yours all day tomorrow."

Not what I was expecting. This was bad. Bad. Bad. Bad.

Did it really matter what time of day Trent Mauldin darkened my door? If he showed up in those jeans and a smile, I'd be under him before I could say foreclosure. No, I could do this. I was going to be strong. I was going to make Tom Sawyer look like an amateur.

\* \* \*

When I got home, I didn't bother wrestling the demon-possessed cornice boards I'd ordered for each bedroom, but I did finish touching up the paint in the Siren's room that overlooked the bay. It was my favorite out of the twelve, yes *twelve*, bedrooms. The walls were a stunning peacock blue, trimmed in ivory, which complemented the Charleston rice bed that was standard issue in all of the rooms. While nine of the bedrooms had very good copies, this was one of the original beds that came with the house, and it had cost a fortune to restore.

With no closets, each room had a huge armoire; I'd ordered a lot of the

pieces online and hoped for the best. I got lucky when this one arrived. Not only was it a good match for the rice bed, but the dealer shipped the wrong armoire, one that I hadn't seen online with a gorgeous mermaid finial. Of course I kept it, and few days later a dresser showed up that matched both pieces perfectly.

Little things like that have happened along the way that made me believe this whole B&B thing was my destiny. So I ignored the giant sucking sound of my savings draining out of my bank account, and kept moving forward.

My cell phone pinged. I snatched it up hoping it was a text from Trent, but my heart sank as I glanced at the daily love letter from my bank. Apparently they were keeping track of the money I was blissfully spending. After paying a fortune for four new HVAC units, I'd made a deal with myself that aside from the mortgage, I wouldn't go into debt. But without a steady paycheck or big fat bonuses from the law firm I no longer worked for, the balance was lower every day. Just enough to pay the mortgage for *maybe* four months, eat Ramen noodles, and pray for paying guests.

I was never much of a spender, unless we're talking shoes and clothes, but the inn was a black hole that needed everything. Was I addicted to spending? Sometimes I wondered as my cursor hovered over the Buy Now link on eBay. Mimosa House wasn't like some beach house you could just furnish with a quick trip to Ikea. Guests who came to a B&B like mine expected to step back in time, and I'd done my best to offer that. Now all I needed was a lot of luck and an inn consistently full of paying guests.

I started down the grand staircase that, no matter how tired I was, always made me feel regal. Making a beeline into the kitchen, I washed down a sandwich with a glass of cheap chardonnay and headed outside. With the sun over the tall pines lining my property, the air was significantly cooler, but still sticky. While I'd been busy painting, the nursery had done such a good job preparing the flowerbeds, I wouldn't need anything more than a trowel.

Sweet talk will get you a lot in these parts, and it had gotten me six pages of plans sketched out by one of the top designers at Abide-A-While Nursery, who happened to be working as a sales person the day I visited. His name was Jeb and he was gorgeous. Not Trent Mauldin gorgeous but definitely *Huffington Post*-worthy accolade material.

Jeb lived in Awendaw, a little community next to Magnolia Bay and offered to come by on his way home and take a look at the project. Actually, he offered more than that, a couple of times. Just dinner, but I'd begged off, saying I was too busy.

I opened the envelope attached to the huge gardenia bush, pruned into a tree, one that I hadn't ordered. It was full of white silky blossoms and smelled heavenly.

*I thought this would look great in the courtyard. Don't try to plant it yourself. It's too heavy. Just let me know whenever you're ready and I'll be there. Jeb.*

I pulled out my phone and told Siri to call Jeb. Okay, I had him in my



phone, but it didn't mean anything. But would accepting the tree mean something to him?

"Hey, Darcy."

"Hi Jeb. Thanks for the tree. It's gorgeous." I fingered one of the blossoms, then stopped when I remembered touching them makes them turn brown.

"It's called August Beauty. I found it stuck back in one of the greenhouses and was pretty shocked it was in full bloom. It's kind of a miracle for it to bloom like that in May, so I thought you should have it."

The scent still lingered on my fingers, reminding me I needed every miracle I could get. "Thanks, Jeb. And I'm glad you talked me into the miniature hibiscuses." Even if they did cost me a fortune at twenty-four dollars a pop. "I'm starting on the entrance now and working my way to the back yard."

"Take your time, follow the instructions, and watch out for the irrigation lines."

"Will do."

"Darcy?" He paused like he was going to ask me out again. "Let me know when you're ready."

The call ended just as the breeze kicked up and overwhelmed me. The fragrance was intoxicating and romantic, and made me feel incredibly guilty. "It's just a tree," I snapped at myself and got busy planting a thousand dollars' worth of miniature hibiscuses.





## Chapter Four

The doorbell rang, and I gasped. I'd overslept, and it was all Trent's fault. And Jane Porter's. After crawling into bed with her book, I finished it, then downloaded the next one in the series before I fell asleep and dreamed about Trent all night. With a damn tool belt. Without a damn tool belt. And just when things got more than interesting and I was panting his name, I'd looked up to see Dalton's face, not Trent's, which was enough to make me bolt upright. That happened three times before four-thirty, when I finally fell asleep.

The doorbell sounded again just as I was pulling on my jeans and a tank top with a built in bra, thank God, because I couldn't find one. Anywhere. I raced upstairs and was horrified to see myself in the hallway mirror. Puffy eyes, mascara that hadn't come off last night with a half-hearted attempt; I looked like hell. *Good.*

I threw open the door to see him standing there in the tool belt of my dreams. He smiled at me and didn't miss a beat. "Morning, beautiful." He kissed me on the cheek. "Saw Stacia opening up this morning and stopped to get coffee." He grinned, handing me a tall iced caramel macchiato, extra whipped cream and, from the looks of it, extra caramel. "I wasn't sure if you liked it hot in the morning."

*Hot. Very hot.* I gave myself a good hard pinch. "Cold is great. Thanks."

"Ready to get to work."

I pointed at the belt. "You know how to use that thing or is it just for show?" He raised his eyebrows, gave me that ridiculously sexy smile. "*The tool belt.* I meant the tool belt."

"I told you I'm handy, and I am."

We'll see about that. "Have you had breakfast?" Because I sure as hell hadn't. And it would be inhumane not to feed the poor man before I worked him to death.

"Oh, one second," he said like he'd forgotten something. He trotted back to his truck and returned with a Bay City Beans bag. Cinnamon rolls. Still warm and wafting spice into the already sticky breeze. There were two gigantic rolls in the bag. My conscious was screaming at me, so I offered him one.

"I already ate. Those are for you. Just show me what to do, and I'll get right on it."

I blushed hard and wanted to drag him into the first room at the top of the stairs for mind-blowing sex before christening the remaining eleven beds. Twelve if you counted mine downstairs. "*Get a grip,*" I muttered under my breath.

"Pardon?" Did he know his tool belt was jingling, reminding me of my dreams?

"I said you might change your mind when you see the job." He followed me up the stairs anyway. I could feel him checking out my butt, which would be noticeably bigger after I ate my breakfast.

I threw open the door to the smallest bedroom, one that I was pretty sure had been a servant's room like my cubbyhole downstairs had been. Still, it was big enough to make into a very nice, but less decadent bedroom. The queen size bed was already pushed into the center of the room, the bedside tables and spindle rocker were huddled up against it, all shrouded in plastic.

I expected him to at least flinch, but he didn't, just walked into the room and ran his hand over one of the many places on the wall I'd patched. "It looks like it's clean, ready to paint. You did a good job with these patched places, but they need to be sanded again. I brought some tools, but no sanding blocks." When he turned and looked at me, his belt inched a little lower and he smiled.

Okay, so maybe he wasn't just a pretty face, and did know what he was doing. "So where did you learn the handy man stuff?" I rifled through a Lowes bag and handed him a brand spanking-new package of blocks.

"During the summers I was in college, I worked for a contractor." He ran his thumb over the cellophane. "It would probably be better to use a finer grit, but this'll do."

Lowes was a good half hour away and wasn't even open yet. It would be a great excuse to get him out of my house or for me to leave. There were other jobs I could put him on, but I was so freaking sick of painting. "If you can make them work, that would be great."

He squatted down and looked at the stickers on the paint cans. Moon shell beige. Vanilla for the trim. This man single-handedly made the case that relaxed fit jeans should definitely go the way of the dinosaurs. "Sure you don't want to prime first?"

"Oh." *Stop staring at his ass.* "I have primer." The large economy five-gallon size. He followed me out of that bedroom into the one I'd finished yesterday. I struggled to lift the bucket.

"I've got it." He took it from me like it weighed nothing and headed back to the room. "Tape. Brushes. Rollers. Looks like you've got everything here that I need," he said and started sanding those spots I'd done such a shitty job on.

Was he really giving me the brush-off in my own house? I swiped at the mascara under my eyes, and looked down at myself. If I were a guy, *I'd* give me the brush-off. "Okay then. Well, thanks for helping."

"Sure. Enjoy your breakfast."

"Oh, I'll be working too." After I finish my coffee and every crumb of those damn rolls. "I'll be outside planting if you have any questions."

He sanded a spot, then ran his hand over it before moving to the next one. "Have fun." He said it like he was enjoying himself, like he wouldn't miss me one little bit.

\* \* \*

Trent watched the door close behind Darcy and threw the sanding block on the floor for a minute to collect himself. Of course Darcy thought he'd offered to help her because he wanted to get in her pants, and he'd shown up to prove her wrong. But, damn, seeing her with the bed head and that sleepy look was almost his undoing. He knew he'd gotten her out of bed, and if he'd had his way, after she opened the front door, he would have joined her.

But there was something up with her, something that had her hiding behind her to-do list and her self-imposed deadline to get her house open for business. Was she was interested in him? Must be or she wouldn't have let him come over. But one thing was for sure, she was bound and determined not to open up. Why was that? Was she coming off a bad relationship? Had some asshole hurt her? Whatever the case, Trent planned on sticking around and hoped she'd let him peel back some of those very pretty layers and get to know her.

It was almost nine by the time he finished priming the walls and was ready to power through the rest of the job. He opened the window to air the place out, and almost wished he hadn't. Darcy was in the garden below, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail. She was on her hands and knees, facing him in shorts and some kind of halter top because it was hot out. Not because she was trying to kill him, which she was. "Damn," he whispered. She glanced up like she'd heard him. Smiled and waved.

"Looking good." Gorgeous. "What's up with the wet clothes?" Even from the second story window, he could see what was up through her wet shirt. God, no woman had ever looked so edible.

"Mr. Hunsucker hates me. Turns the hose on me all the time, but it's so hot, I don't mind."

"You're gorgeous. You know that don't you?"

She craned her long neck up and gave him a look laced with the smile she was trying to hide. "If you're trying to get out of work..."

He laughed. "Done priming. Just getting ready to paint. I should be

finished in a couple of hours. Wanna grab an early lunch?"

"Two coats." God, he'd love to kiss that smirk right off of her face. "Let me know when you're done, and I'll make you lunch."

"Is that a promise?" Yeah, she was definitely flirting.

"Get back to work."

\* \* \*

Okay, when he started the job, he was all gung-ho, like one of those guys on those DIY shows, but after a primer and two coats of paint on three of the walls, he still had another wall to paint. What was he doing? He'd been a professional golfer, for God's sake. Not a professional painter.

He was hot. His shoulder was killing him, and cleaning up the paint he'd spilled on Darcy's newly finished hardwoods had been a bitch. Was any woman worth this?

Even hurt last year, between endorsements and winnings, he'd made over three million dollars. Jesus, he could have hired every painter in Charleston county, and saved himself the trouble. And one thing was for sure, Darcy Vance was trouble. She made him do things he'd never do for any other woman. And why was that? Was he bored? Was she the equivalent of a three-foot putt to win a major? Maybe he just needed to sleep with her to get her out of his system.

But, apparently, he sucked at the pursuit part. Then again he'd *never* had to pursue a woman before, never had to work to get the girl figuratively, and sure as hell not literally. Was he even going about this the right way?

Tanner might know. Out of Trent's three brothers, his twin was the true expert on women. They weren't identical twins, but if you put the two of them in a room full of women, they'd all be drawn to Trent for about five seconds because of his looks. By the sixth second, all Tanner would have to do is open that southern gent mouth of his, and they'd be all over him. God, could Trent really go to his younger-by-three-minutes brother for advice? He'd rather be sliced up into fish bait and tossed in the bay.

Besides, after he slept with Darcy, what would he do with her? Aside from the obvious. He knew what women like her wanted after a test drive. Jesus, just look around. Maybe she bought this place to make it into a business for now. But what woman buys a house this big unless they want to marry and fill it with kids?

He'd spent the last fifteen years leaving as soon as he saw that doe-eyed look in a woman's eyes that said she'd wanted more. And the last time, he'd hurt someone he really cared about. He hated the guilt that came with that. He'd have made it up to her if he could. As long as it didn't involve holy matrimony.

He stared at the last damn wall. What the hell was he even doing here? He didn't want the white picket fence with any woman.

When he dipped the roller in the tray, he heard her laugh, and something tightened in his chest. "Just finish the damn wall and leave," he snapped.



## Sweet Home Carolina

That's what he's good at, being great for a few hours in one town and then moving on to the next stop on the tour. Correction. That *was* what he was good at.

She laughed again and he heard another voice. A man's voice. He went to the window. *Shit*. Tanner.

Trent couldn't make out what his brother said to Darcy, but there was a huge ceramic pot with a freshly planted rose tree that wasn't in the garden the last time Trent had looked. Tanner pushed a tendril of hair behind Darcy's ear.

"No," Trent said. "Oh, hell no." He threw the roller back in the tray and flew down the stairs and out the back door to the garden, stopping just short of Darcy like a lion protecting his mate. Chest heaving. Fists at his side. "I see you've met my brother." Trent fought the urge to shove Darcy behind him, so Tanner couldn't ogle her.

"I'm parked at the marina, bro. Saw your truck and doubled back to say hey," Tanner said. "Saw this pretty lady struggling with that great big pot and offered to lend a hand."

"You were a huge help, Tanner. Thank you," Darcy gushed. "You should have heard him Trent, he shamed Mr. Hunsucker into not spraying me with the garden hose."

"It was nothing," Tanner said, all *aw shucks* with his hands in his pockets, which is where they'd better stay if he knew what was good for him.

"Oh, it was something all right, and I can't wait to hear more about your excursion company, I think my guests would love it."

What the hell? Yes, while, Trent was working his ass off upstairs for hours, his brother had stopped by and lifted a ceramic pot, pitched his excursion company, and stolen his girl. *His girl*? Where the hell did that come from?

"I was just getting ready to make some lunch," Darcy looked at Trent and blushed like she suddenly remembered he was there, then back to his brother. "Would you like to join us, Tanner?"

"Nope. He can't," Trent said, before Tanner could open his mouth.

"You sure?" Darcy asked Tanner, who was definitely enjoying this.

"For you, Darcy Vance, anything."

Yep, Trent was going to beat the shit out of him as soon as he got him away from here.

"Sorry. Can't. We have lunch plans." Trent said, grabbing his brother's arm and dragging him to the truck.

"We do?" Tanner had to stop with that drawl that always sucked the women in.

"Yep. With mom."

Darcy had her hands on her sweet hips, smiling. "Oh, well, have fun you guys. Tell Rosie I said hi."

"We will," Trent said as he shoved his brother in the truck. "I'll come back later and finish that last wall."

"But this could take a while, Darcy." Tanner was about to bust a gut, hanging out the window. "Because we're having lunch. *With mom.*"

"Shut the fuck up," Trent hissed and shoved the truck in gear.

Tanner's head smacked the window frame hard. Good.

"You're buying me lunch," Tanner said after he caught his breath from laughing his ass off.

"I am not."

"Oh, hell yes you are. Did you see her?"

Yeah Trent saw her all right, but leave it to his know-it-all brother swoop in and try to steal his girl. Damn it. *Not* his girl.

"Never seen you like this, bro. From the looks of it, you've got it bad," Tanner said as they pulled up in front of The Crab Shack. "Don't think she feels the same way about you."

"Fuck you, Tanner."

"Relax, brother, I'm not after your girl. I'm not even sure I have time for lunch, going out with a kayak group going out at two-thirty." His brother motioned to Trent's face.

He looked in the rearview mirror and swiped a drop of paint off of his cheek.

"She's not my girl." She's just another beautiful woman, and with his brother flirting with her, well, it brought out the fierce competitor in him. That's all it was.

"Really? 'Cause if she's not—"

"Don't even think about it, asshole." Okay, Trent didn't know what to do with that.

"Seriously never seen you like this. And as much as I'm enjoying the hell out of it, I'm kinda shocked. I actually feel a little bit sorry for you." He got out of the truck. "But you still owe me lunch."

\* \* \*

Just to be on the safe side, Trent waited until he saw Tanner disappear into the horizon with the dozen or so kayakers who had booked a four-hour trip up the Intracoastal Waterway. Then, there was a big problem on the Arcadia Dunes job site. By the time Trent got back to Mimosa House, Darcy was in her kitchen dressed up in white carpi pants and some kind of sexy pink top.

"Sorry it took me a while to get back." He kissed her on the cheek like he was picking her up for a date. "You look beautiful."

"No worries. Thanks." She blushed and stuffed a book into her purse. "How was your mom?"

"What? Oh. Mom's great. Always great." He probably shouldn't have lied to her, but if that's what it took to get Tanner out of the picture, so be it. "I'll finish painting that last wall; I can do the trim tomorrow." Was he inviting himself back? Yes. Yes, he was.

"The room looks beautiful, Trent. If that professional golfer thing doesn't work out, you could make a fortune painting," she laughed, and that was just



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about the nicest sound he'd heard all day.

He put the Piggly Wiggly sack on the counter. "I picked up a good bottle of wine and a couple of steaks; thought we could throw them on the grill. Relax a little."

She looked embarrassed, not what he was going for. "I'm sorry, Trent, but I can't, I have book club tonight."

He feigned heartbreak. Maybe not completely faking it. "You're blowing me off." He closed the gap between them, smiling at her. "For book club?"

The chemistry between them was palpable. He knew it, and so did she. For a moment she tilted her chin up. An invitation. He threaded his fingers in her hair. Just before he kissed her, her eyes went wide, like that was the last thing she should be doing. At first, she melted into the kiss, then she pulled back, her hands pushing halfheartedly against him. But he didn't let go.

She leaned her forehead against his chest. "Trent, I can't do this."

"But we are doing this." He kissed her again, then pushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. "I promise you it'll be more fun than book club."

She looked at him and shook her head. Yep, she wanted him as much as he wanted her, but something was holding her back. And it had nothing to do with this house or some book club.

Her to-do list was beside him on the counter with three neat columns of things that needed to be done. All of the items had been checked off on the first page, but the legal pad was thick and ruffled like there were several more pages like that. He'd seen for himself there was a lot more painting to be done. Hell, even with an electric screwdriver, just screwing back on the switch plates and the electrical socket plates in the whole house would take forever. She was definitely in over her head, and he'd said he wanted to help. Get to know her. Well, this seemed like as good a way as any.

If Big Jack meant what he said and Trent could work as much or as little as he wanted, he'd help Darcy plow through the list. Maybe figure out why she seemed so gun-shy. He let go of her and kissed her on the forehead. "Have fun. See you tomorrow." She was either interested or desperate because she didn't say no.



# Chapter Five

What was I doing? I'd said *no men*, and then there I was with my arms wrapped around Trent Mauldin and my tongue down his throat.

When I'd heard him come through the door, I'd grabbed my to-do list, like *that* could protect me from his charm. But I'm not sure there is anything on the planet that could do that. Even chanting Dalton Prichard over and over again in my brain the whole time he kissed me, turned into *do me, please*, by the end of the kiss.

Then he gave me that crooked grin, and I almost blew off going to book club altogether. What was I thinking? Stacia was right; I needed to get out more. Flipping down the visor, I took in the bags under my eyes and wanted to kick myself. It was more than obvious that I'd read the entire book club novel before I fell asleep and dreamed about Trent. And Dalton.

I wasn't sure what to wear to this soiree, but chose a crisp pair of white capri pants and a pink sleeveless V-neck top, hoping the pink would make me look a little more human. When that hadn't work, I'd spackled on concealer and makeup, and put some berry colored lip-gloss on so that I'd look a little less like that redheaded vampire in the *Twilight* movies.

Had to admit, I was as nervous about the book club thing as I was excited. I grew up a tomboy and most of my friends were guys. That hadn't changed much over the years. At the firm, I was close to one woman, my assistant, Chloe. I'd always felt awkward in a big social group of women. Maybe the book club would be small—three or four people would be good—including Stacia. Sounded doable to me.

Main Street was hopping. There wasn't a single open space, so I pulled into the city gardens parking lot sandwiched between Main and Spencer Road. Though the city was barely a mile wide, the historic gardens extended the entire width and were famous for their camellias in fall and winter and roses in spring and summer. The gardens were also a big selling point for the B&Bs

on Spencer Road, especially the ones that had a full-on view. The homes across the street had been staggered so that they had views of the gardens as well.

Starting up Francis Marion Way, the main road that dissects the city, I walked toward the traffic circle at the center of Main Street. Signs out along the bars and restaurants advertised The Tarpon Crawl, which sounds funny since a tarpon is a fish, but the city is known for events that coincide with the local fishing competitions throughout the year.

I'd been told that truckloads of men converge on the town for the tournaments, but especially those for tarpon. They come to drink beer, fish, and wear the clever T-shirts they get when they enter the contests. Out of all the ones I'd seen around town, my favorite was an old one worn by my electrician—*Magnolia Bay—Where Men Are Men and Tarpon Are Nervous*.

Wasn't sure if I was supposed to bring something to the meeting, but I figured since it was at the coffee shop folks just would just buy themselves a drink and grab one of Bay City Beans amazing desserts. The sandwich sign outside the door said the store was closed for the You Had Me at Merlot Book Club meeting. I peeked through the window and saw about thirty women chatting around two long tables dressed in white clothes with all sorts of potluck appetizers. And lots of wine, which at that moment sounded way better than coffee.

I was greeted by a squeal from Stacia. She hurried over, careful not to spill her wine, and gave me a huge hug, which is another common thing about the South. Folks here are big huggers.

"You came," she gushed.

"And I read the book." I laughed uncomfortably, trying hard not to peel her off of me. "I was relieved the group isn't reading *War and Peace*."

I'm not much of a hugger, which of course, huggers automatically sense and latch on harder, longer. Finally, she let go.

"Yeah, I'm not too thrilled about reading that one for my lit class. Did you like the Jane book?"

"Downloaded the sequel and would be reading now if I hadn't come here." And if I wasn't having Trent for dinner, which sounded delicious but was definitely not a good idea. "By the way, thanks for inviting me."

"You're welcome and wow, you're fast. But so am I, I'm already one glass ahead of you. Red or white?"

"I was planting all day, boiling in sunscreen and bug spray." And it takes a lot of energy out of a girl not to think about guy like Trent when he's in close proximity to a bed. Or a wall, or any other flat surface. "White sounds lovely."

Stacia gave me a generous pour and put one of those wine glass charms on the stem. It looked like an old-fashioned bottle cap and in the center, it had a picture of three little girls maybe from the 1950s. There was an arrow pointing to the middle girl that said, *Pees when she laughs*. I raised my eyebrows

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at Stacia's charm that had a glamorous-looking older woman and said, *I'm hot and flashy.*

"I went home to pick up my dish and change clothes; by the time I got back, all of the good charms were taken. Reba makes these and sells them in her trinket shop up the street. My favorite one says, *I'm not really a bitch, but I play one in your life.*"

"They're cute." I took a big sip of chardonnay and fingered the charm. "Sorry I didn't bring anything."

"It's your first time, you weren't supposed to." She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the tables where most of the women were chatting and nibbling. "Come on. I want to introduce you to some of the girls. We're a big group, but we're fun and nice." And then, under her breath, I could have sworn I heard her say *mostly*.

Stacia introduced me to a half dozen women and then stopped at Camellia. "Hi, Camellia. I see you've got my favorite wine charm."

For such a beautiful woman, Camellia Bloom-Bennett had beady little snake eyes. She was dressed to the nines with too much jewelry, at least it would have looked like that on me. But Camellia had an elegance about her that allowed her to pull it off.

"You may not see a hot flash for at least thirty years, Stacia, but I promise you..." Only she looked straight at me. "This charm was made for me."

Stacia's smile was thin and plastic. "I'll have to get Reba to make some extras. Have you met Darcy Vance?"

She extended her hand. "Why, yes, we have. Lovely to see you again, Darby."

Neither Stacia nor I bothered to correct her. We just headed to the next group of women who looked to be around my age. Stacia introduced us and kept looking over Camellia's way. At first I thought it was my imagination, but by the time I'd chatted a little with each of the women, Stacia had drained her glass and steam was coming out of her ears.

We moseyed back over to the wine table for a refill. "Don't tell me Camellia has it in for you too," I said.

"*Sawyer's mother,*" she whispered. "I know she's a bitch. She knows she's a bitch, but let me get two glasses of wine in me and every little snippy thing she does bugs the ever-loving shit out of me."

"Jesus, what happens after three glasses?"

"Last Christmas?" Stacia took a big gulp. "A catfight. Well, I was fighting for Sawyer, who never stands up to her. She hates me, and you know what? I'm glad; it kind of validates me as a good person."

I reached for her glass as she lifted it to her lips and then set both of ours on one of the high top tables. "You know what? I think we should switch to coffee."

We were doctoring our coffee when two women blew in the doors like a stiff summer breeze. A communal squeal went up and almost everyone



flocked to the pretty redhead one, congratulating her on her wedding. The blonde one had a sly smile on her face like she knew something the rest of the class didn't.

"That's Peach and Willa Dunn," Stacia said. "I'll introduce you when the crowd clears. Peach just married Brady Loveless, and miracle of all miracles, Willa's dating his brother Knox."

"Why is it a miracle?" I asked.

"Peach and Willa are Lilly Dunn's daughters."

"You mean Lilly Bloom-Dunn? Of Dunn-Right Preservation? So Camellia's their...?"

"Aunt. And The Loveless boys are all hot and wild; their family owns Loveless Brothers Construction."

"The company that builds all the McMansions in Magnolia Run?"

Magnolia Run was the brand spanking new part of Magnolia Bay, land that had been annexed by the city just after the McMansions started going up to expand the tax base. The Dunns ran a preservation company that fought to keep new construction from overtaking Magnolia Bay's historic homes. No wonder it was a miracle their families were bound together, and by the gaga look on Willa's face, it might not be long before there was another knot tied.

"So, *you're* the new girl," someone drawled from behind me. "Connor told me all about you."

I turned to find a petit woman about my age sizing me up. She was five feet tall, if that, a classic blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty, who, looked incredibly vogue in her lemon yellow sheath dress. And it was linen, something I would look like I'd slept in two minutes after I put it on. But this woman looked like invisible fairies followed her around, steaming out the possibility of wrinkles before they even happened. Azure eyes sized me up with equal amounts of southern fried bitchiness and mischief.

"I'm Connor's neighbor, Miranda Hamilton. I own the Ivy Cottage. Best B&B in town."

"Down, Miranda," Stacia laughed, "Darcy's one of us. At least I hope she will be."

As touched as I was by Stacia's sentiments, I wasn't quite sure what that meant.

"She meet the other GRITS?" Miranda raised her eyebrows, for Stacia's benefit, her eyes still on me.

The only grits I knew, I hated. If I was forced to eat them, I choked them down with too much cream and sugar.

Stacia looked at me and cocked her head to the side. "You know GRITS, right? Girls Raised In The South?" I nodded, knowing full well Magnolia Bay was so small, everyone knew everyone's business. I couldn't very well lie and say I was from Atlanta. Although technically it would be true if I didn't say *originally from*, but that was just the lawyer in me splitting adverbs.

"There's six of us," Stacia gushed. "And we stick together."



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"And drink a lot of wine," Miranda added, still skeptical. "Which we'll be doing after book club is over and Stacia locks the doors."

"Just me, Miranda, Dusty, Shelby, Hannah, and Emma. We keep each other sane. Oh, and when we have too much to drink, we're also the Six Chicks."

"Don't forget the Magnolia Bay Bitches," Miranda added, her gaze softening a bit.

No. That title belonged to Camilla who'd been joined by her sister Daisy; both were looking my way with fake smiles and daggers in their beady blues.

"Unfortunately, I'm not a GRIT." But I was surprised that I maybe, just a little bit, wanted to be. "And Seven Chicks just doesn't have the same ring to it."

"We drink enough wine, we can come up with another name." Miranda's face broke into a genuine smile, making me think that *Huffington Post* writer must have been looking at her when he made his declaration. "Or we can just stick with the Magnolia Bay Bitches. We'll figure that out later when we introduce you to the rest of the Chicks. Right now, I'm going to get this show on the road and over with so that we can get to the real fun."

Miranda commanded the sea of women to take their seats and then led the discussion of the book, which all thirty members loved, except for Daisy. Camellia didn't seem to have an opinion, leading me to believe that she borrowed her sister's like she would a sweater or a hairbrush.

The group discussed the protagonist's struggle with her marriage and the reality of getting older. Some of the things were covered in the book, and then like all good estrogen-fueled discussions, the conversation went off the rails. The older women in the group, and there were probably a dozen well north of fifty, began sharing their own personal horror stories about aging.

By ten after nine, Stacia was able to click the lock behind the last straggler, and a cheer went up. Six beautiful women, and surprisingly enough, me, whooped it up and headed for the wine table.

"Okay, we're gonna get the intros over with fast so we can get on to the drinking. This is Darcy." Miranda pointed to me like she was Vanna White and I was a shiny new vowel. Then she machine gunned introductions around the small circle of women—Dusty, Shelby, Hannah, and Emma.

"Glad to meet you, Darcy." Hannah looked like she was going to throw up. "But God, I'm so glad they're gone."

"Same goes, Darcy." Shelby, the tall brunette nodded solemnly. "But I'm glad they're gone too."

"Yeah, we should just make a pact to kill each other before we get old," Dusty snapped.

"You think those older women were just trying to scare the hell out of us?" Emma asked, stuffing a chip in her mouth.

"Well, they did a damn good job; there's no way I'll sleep tonight," Shelby drawled.

## Kim Boykin

“Falling parts. Leaking parts. And can you imagine no sex drive? Good God,” Stacia added.

“Oh, forget about them. And so what? If we have falling, leaky parts, and never get any, at least we’ll have each other.” Miranda winked at me and lifted her glass. “Drink up.”

I took a great big swallow of wine and got the distinct impression, that maybe, just maybe I’d been crowned the Seventh Chick.

## Chapter Six

It was just before seven p.m. when Trent entered Big Jack's office to find his dad on the phone. It was just a construction trailer, but that would change next week when the Arcadia Dunes showroom opened. His dad had pissed off Aunt Daisy and the rest of the Historical Society folks by outbidding them on the biggest building on Main Street, the old Kress Five and Dime.

Since the Five and Dime was constructed just after World War II, the building wasn't subject to the same restrictions as older structures in Magnolia Bay. Before the city and the Historical Society could change the laws to include the building, Big Jack had already bought the property and gutted it. He'd even shrouded the windows with brown paper while the work was done, just to give the *Hysterical Society*, as Big Jack lovingly called them, nightmares as to what was behind the curtain.

And they were going to scream when they saw the all the chrome and glass and so many giant flat-screen TV monitors, the place looked more like an electronics store than a real estate sales office.

Trent knew even if Big Jack was about to end the call right before he stepped into the trailer, his father would draw it out. He liked making people wait. Trent pulled out his own phone and started scrolling. A few months ago, when he was still on the tour, he would have checked his practice schedule by now, his travel schedule, the weather, his email and texts. There were always a bunch of those, a few from buddies wanting tickets to that weekend's tournament, but mostly from women he knew in every tour stop.

All he had to do was show up at the course and there was a gallery of beautiful women, lean and tanned in short golf skirts, lined up, hoping he'd choose them. He'd never had to work to get a woman to notice him, hell, he'd never even had to pursue a woman. Trent wasn't really sure he knew how. Which made constantly thinking about the tall luscious redhead in Mimosa House all the more confounding and scary.

Yeah, he wouldn't admit it to another living soul, but Darcy Vance stirred up a lot of shit in him, other than mind-bending carnal attraction, and that scared the hell out of him. Maybe if he wasn't so attracted to her, if he could just stop thinking about her, he could stop feeling so tangled up.

This wasn't like him at all; Trent had always been the fearless one, Big Jack's only son to leave Magnolia Bay and strike out on his own. He'd made choices on the golf course that were crazy fearless, and for a long time they paid off. Until he got hurt. So why did this one exquisite redhead excite and terrify him in equal measure?

"Good to talk to you, Ralph; thanks for pushing that through for me. My boy's here. Gotta go." Big Jack ended the call. His big leather chair groaned under his weight as he leaned back, obviously pleased with himself.

Trent put his phone away. "You look like a happy guy."

"I just got approval to move the entrance of Arcadia Dunes. Make it more like the Isle of Palms so folks have to drive through Magnolia Bay to get there. Of course the development will still be on the county side of the city limits, but this way, the guests will get the flavor of the town. It'll be good for the place." Big Jack said it like he cared about what was good for anybody other than himself.

"Yeah, that'll make everybody happy, lots of Buffies and Kippies plowing through town to get to their shiny new Arcadia Dunes McMansions or even better, condos." Trent started to ask his dad if he'd changed the plans just so he could piss the townspeople off even more, most notably Aunt Daisy and Aunt Camilla, when he saw something in his father's office he'd never seen before. Well, that wasn't true, he'd seen it all right, but it'd been a very long time.

His dad had never been the kind of father who whips out his wallet to show people pictures of his kids, much less brag on them. As a matter of fact, Trent couldn't ever remember his dad ever saying he was proud of him or his brothers.

But there on the shelf was Trent's first trophy. He'd won it playing in a Fourth of July tournament at Patriot's Point Golf Course when he was twelve. It'd been hot as hell that day, but, competing against adults for the first time, Trent had barely noticed the weather. His mom had followed him the whole eighteen holes while the gallery thinned out because of the record heat. His Aunt Poppy was keeping his brothers, Trent was on the ninth tee when he overheard Big Jack tell his mom he had to leave to check on the boys. What he was really doing was checking the lines to see how the baseball teams he'd bet on were doing. And God knows when you're betting the over under for the number of errors in a baseball game, you're a goner.

That day, Trent had finished last place in the first flight, the group the best golfers compete in. And Big Jack had lost big time. Trent remembered the huge fight his parents had, his mom crying, and he remembered holding on to that trophy for dear life. He'd even slept with it, and now here it was on

the shelf among Big Jack's pictures of himself and politicians, celebrities. Wedged between a picture of Big Jack and Bill Murray and a picture of a skinny, tough-looking twelve-year-old, holding a trophy that was almost as big as he was. What the hell did that mean?

"You doing all right?" Knowing good and well Trent didn't smoke, Big Jack offered him a cigar anyway.

"No thanks. I'm good. But your golf course? Not so good."

"What wrong with it?"

"Your project manager is screwing it up. He's cutting corners, ignoring ecological restrictions. It's already a mess, but it's going to be an even bigger one if this asshole keep at it."

"I've heard that tone before. Sounds like you're getting ready to quit." The word *again* was implied.

Jesus. Trent gave up three sports to concentrate on golf when he was sixteen, and his dad has never let him live it down. But hadn't he quit golf? Did that make him a quitter?

"You pay me for my professional opinion, so I'm giving it."

"Maybe that's why I asked you to stick around, so if things went sideways, you could fix them."

"I'm telling you now, before this moron gets so far into the project, even you and your cronies won't have enough money to fix it." That gave Big Jack a laugh. His dad was so damn arrogant. Trent had only been home a few weeks and he was already sick of him. "Well, here's the thing. If you keep betting on that asshole, if he keeps wrecking things, the golf course you're building your resort around won't be worth shit. Then the bad press will start, and when that happens, and it will, you'll be screwed. Maybe you're expecting me to fix it, but I'm no miracle worker."

Big Jack nodded and relit his cigar, puffing deeply, making the tip glow and the smoke snake above his head. "Maybe you're more than you think you are."

\* \* \*

I didn't actually see Sawyer Bennett's face—clearly. But I know he existed because I woke up on my foyer floor at three o'clock in the morning with my head resting on the bottom step. Stiff and sore and still drunk, all I wanted to do was fall in my bed.

I took the steps to my apartment like a toddler, only not quite as coordinated.

I remembered Stacia calling Sawyer at some point last night, probably after we panicked because we'd run out of wine. Not long after that, a big white van pulled in front of Bay City Beans, and somehow all seven of us appeared in the van. Thankfully, those GRITS know how to hold their vino and nobody got sick.

I was the last one dropped off. Two strong arms helped me up my walkway. Sawyer fumbled with my keys and pushed my front door open. I



turned, my face smashing into that beautiful broad chest that had the softest T-shirt stretched across it. He smelled so good, I let out a big dreamy sigh, tilted my chin up. God, he was tall.

Stacia peeked out from the other side of him. "Don't even think about it," she tried to look stern but cracked up. She reached for me, drawing me in for a great big hug. "You're one of us now, Darcy."

And for the first time since I'd moved to Magnolia Bay, I felt like I belonged.

\* \* \*

The relentless pounding in my head refused to stop. It was like someone with a battering ram attempting to wake me up. "Shhhh." I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to go back to sleep. After I don't know how long, it did stop. I looked at the clock. I hadn't slept past seven in years and it was nine o'clock.

I couldn't move. Every alcohol soaked sinew of my body screamed, and I swore a silent oath to *never* drink again because it hurt too damn much to even whisper.

The noise started up again, and I swear the ground shook like there was an earthquake. Of course that was probably the part where God was catching up to my request to just kill me now, rather than make me ride out my hangover. There was the faint sound of people talking, making me wonder if I'd even gotten past the dead drunk part of the process. Or maybe this old place really was haunted.

The voices, and they were definitely voices, increased and then a fifty-thousand-foot tree must have fallen, because, *boy*, did it make a sound. I jerked out of bed, stormed up the stairs in my pajamas. Throwing open my front door, I stopped cold. My beautiful entrance, one-half of the custom wrought iron gate was leaning against one post. And the other massive post was lying on the ground, a pile of broken concrete and stucco.

Every ounce of alcohol in my body turned to dragon fuel as I stomped toward a construction crew. "What the hell do you think you're doing? This is my property." And then it occurred to me, the gate wasn't the only thing they'd wrecked. *My flowers were gone*. "You bastards."

A brawny guy with a bad comb-over, stepped forward, arms crossed. "You want to yell at someone, I'm the foreman, yell at me."

"Darcy." I whipped around to see Trent standing there in a Mauldin Enterprises T-shirt and jeans with a shovel in his hand.

"*You*. You're in on this too? I'm giving the whole lot of you thirty seconds to get off my property or I'm calling the cops and having your arrested for trespassing, destruction of private property, and..."

"Save your breath, lady; we have a permit from the county for this road and your entrance is in the way." The foreman handed me a piece of paper that I shredded and threw into his fat face. "Fine. If you don't like it get a damn lawyer."

"I *am* a lawyer. And until this is settled, if you even so much as breathe on

my property, I'll not only sue your employer, I'll hold each and every one of you personally liable. And if you're not pissing your pants now, you might want to reconsider because I'm a damn good lawyer."

He gave me a go-to-hell look and got on his walkie. "Yeah, we have a problem."

\* \* \*

As awful as it was for Trent to see one side of Darcy's gate in shambles, man, she was a force. Angry, chest heaving, fists clenched. Powerful. And sexy as hell. She had a bed head thing going on and was so pissed off, she probably didn't realize she was still in her pajamas—a tiny pair of shorts, a tank top. No bra. Every single male on the job site was staring at her. Trent didn't like that one bit. He threw down the shovel and started to take his shirt off to cover her when she smacked his hand.

"*You.*" Her index finger drilled hard against his chest, making him backpedal a little. "You said you wanted to *help* me."

"I did. I do." Her blue eyes were awfully bloodshot. He'd imagined she'd smell girly, or natural like citrus, but she reeked. Wine maybe? "I was driving by when I saw the bulldozer. I put two and two together and asked them to wait. I banged on your door like crazy, but there was no answer."

He reached for her hand but she jerked away. "I don't believe you," she sputtered, and for a second, he thought he saw tears in her eyes. "You work for your dad; you're on the dark side." She drilled her finger into the Mauldin Enterprises logo on his shirt.

Her words came out in little puffs, and Trent was sure she was going to hyperventilate. She mopped her forehead like she sweating, and she swiped away a single tear. She was shaking, maybe from the anger, maybe from the heartbreak of seeing part of her dream smashed and lying on the ground. Trent didn't know, but he knew she'd rather die than burst into tears in front of those clowns.

"Darcy. Listen to me!" He reached for her again.

She pulled away, refusing to even look at him. "Go to hell, Trent."

The big foreman ended his call and came within six feet of Darcy before she stopped him dead in his tracks with a look Trent never wanted to see directed at him.

"Hey, don't blame Trent, he saved your damn flowers." He jerked his head toward a tarp on the other side of the gate.

All of the bedding plants she had painstakingly planted and been uprooted, including twenty-one miniature hibiscuses. Fresh dirt was piled over their roots to keep them moist. She stared at the tarp, still in fighting mode and with a vibe rolling off of her that said she could kill every man there with her bare hands.

"Lady, unless you file anything, the county says we can resume tomorrow."

"Oh, I'll file all right," she snapped. "I'll have you so buried with paperwork, you won't be able to find your ass with a GPS."

The guy nodded to his men. "Let's get out of here."

Darcy stood her ground like a pit bull until their trucks disappeared down the street. She sprinted into the house, tore up the stairs, and didn't seem to be aware of Trent's presence. She ran into the room at the end of the hall that faced his grandmother's house. She threw herself across the bed and was sobbing so loud, she didn't hear him come in, or if she did, she didn't react.

The room looked like something out of a magazine, all white. Peaceful. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Darcy, I'm sorry."

She stopped crying and whipped around to look at him. So angry. So beautiful.

She shook her head and didn't say anything. She was crushed. He saw it in her eyes, the thin line of her lips that stuttered when she took a deep breath. Her posture that had gone from warrior to almost submissive. And somehow, he knew she'd never felt anything like she was feeling at that very moment and it was killing her.

"Darcy..." He laid down behind her, pulled her into him. She resisted at first, then wrapped herself around him and cried even harder. He held her until she cried herself to sleep, then splayed his hand across her butt and pulled her in closer.

Just after noon, she woke up. Breath still a little stuttery, she tipped her chin up and looked at him. Her hair smelled good and he loved the way her body fit his perfectly. "You okay?" He pressed a kiss onto her forehead.

She shook her head. "I have to get up and get down to the County Planning Commission."

He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "You going to file a protest?"

She looked at him for a minute like she was trying to decide whose side he was really on. He hoped the fact that he was there with her in his arms counted for something, but he knew she didn't let people in easily. He understood, he'd been forced to be like that when he was on the tour and everybody wanted a piece of him. But what did he want from her? To win her trust? To win her? Was that what this was all about? Winning?

This was a bad idea on so many levels. Even if he knew how to have some kind of real relationship, he wasn't looking for one. He had always been up front about that with any woman he'd been involved with. Another reason why being on the tour had suited him. He'd been good at leaving 'em, not so good with the loving part. And whenever things went that way, when they'd gotten complicated, he was back on his insane but comfortable schedule. It suited him, and somehow, women actually seemed to understand he couldn't stick around for them. But what excuse did he have now?

What he did have was a raging hard-on and nowhere in particular that he had to jet off to. He was a little shocked at himself because he was trying really to be a good guy, to do the right thing, but could he tell her straight up that he wasn't her happily ever after? Darcy deserved better. She was fierce but fragile and deserved a hell of a lot better than he could give her.

Her finger trembled a little as she traced his stubbled jaw on one side and then the other, she watched her fingers skim across his lips. It took everything in him not to draw her in and kiss her senseless. He was definitely sure she wasn't ready for that.

"Yes," she whispered, "I'm going to file everything I can think of and then some. I'm going to stop your dad, Trent."

She waited for a beat for his reaction. "Do what you have to do." He crooked his finger under her chin and raised it so that there was no place for her to look but his eyes. "I'm on your side, Darcy."

"Really?" She breathed. "He's your father, and you don't even know me."

"My dad's an asshole. It won't bother me to see him sweat."

She shocked the hell out of him, laying into him with a soul-shattering kiss. One of his hands slid down her back, cupping her bottom, the other tangled in her hair. Her hands started out fisted in his shirt and, by the time they broke away, they were under his shirt, stroking his bare back.

"What was that for?" He smiled against her lips.

"You saved my plants."

Any blood he had in the upper half of his body had already rushed south, making him wish he'd thrown himself in front of that bulldozer and saved the damn gate. Instead, five minutes later, he was letting himself out the front door, and she was getting ready to do battle with his father.





# Chapter Seven

I spent three hours, researching and writing a brilliant but brief argument and filling out the necessary forms to stop Mauldin Enterprises in their tracks. Then it was show time.

No one in law school wants to admit it, but the way you look, that initial impression when your opposition or a judge sizes you up can almost be as important as your preparation.

*Lesson number one: dressing is an art form, a game where girding yourself in the right armor is crucial not just to success but survival.*

Granted, I was just going to the building that held the Charleston County Planning Commission and Board of Appeals offices and not a court of law, but I had high hopes the rules I'd played by in my former life applied to the boardroom as well.

With no time to do my hair, I twisted the whole length of it up into a sumo-type knot when I showered so that when I let it down, it was full, slightly fluffed with a do-me look. I smoothed it into a more appropriate style before rummaging through my sizeable makeup drawer for the good stuff—my Chanel stash. I put on my high priced war paint that really does look better than the cheaper stuff, the cobalt blue eyeliner made my eyes look even bluer. I was going for serious. Sincere. Mission accomplished.

I pushed aside the pair of clothing racks that held my more practical duds, and flipped through a third rack of insanely expensive suits I was sure I'd never wear again but I couldn't bring myself to give away. And it was probably a good thing I hadn't. If this whole B&B thing didn't work out, I'd either be getting my resume together to go back to the job I hated or selling my precious threads on eBay to cover the mortgage.

The black Prada number that cost more than my monthly condo payment back in Atlanta called to me. A pencil thin short black skirt, a tailored blazer with a double layer collar, not that I'd be needing it since it was way past hot

as hell outside. But the jacket really set off the ivory Dolce & Gabbana lace T-shirt with the scalloped hem.

Slipping into my sacred Jimmy Choo stilettos, I fished the briefcase I never thought I'd need again out of one of the plastic storage tubs, and went to war.

It was after four-thirty p.m. by the time I pushed through the doors of the Appeals Office. The three men standing behind the receptionist's desk stopped arguing about whatever had their boxers in a twist and gaped at me. Completely ignoring them, I smiled at the receptionist.

"Hi, I'm Darcy Vance. I need to speak with someone about filing an appeal against an encroachment on my property in Magnolia Bay."

The woman turned and looked at the three stooges to see if they wanted to field my question. Still ogling.

She rolled her eyes. "You'll have to fill out these forms, and—"

"I can help you with that," one of the gawkers, a tall, rail thin fiftyish looking guy, said. He extended his hand as his counterparts still gaped.

On the drive over I'd worried how this was going to go down. After essentially living in paint splattered work clothes and working so hard, sometimes I smelled like I never bathed, it was nice to know I still had it, or still had enough of it to make this guy sit up and take notice.

"Jim Bo Cramer." His handshake was so clammy, I fought the urge to wipe my palm off on my skirt.

"Is there someplace we can talk? Privately?" He gave his friends a smug look and ushered me toward a conference room.

Honestly, at twenty-two thousand dollars, my annual tax bill for Mimosa House was a freaking fortune, and the moment I stepped into that room, I knew why. The place was every bit as posh as any of the conference rooms the firm in Atlanta boasted, and it had a killer view of the Intracoastal Waterway to boot.

*Lesson number two: after girding yourself for battle, always let your adversary know where they rank.*

I sat down at the head of the table, slipped my jacket off, and set it in the chair to my left. He sat down on the opposite side and made a note on his legal pad that I couldn't read. Probably something along the lines of *oh, shit*.

"Mr. Cramer—"

"Please, call me Jim Bo."

"Jim. Bo. I'm here..."

"Yes, I've been made keenly aware of the issue with your property. We've been fielding calls from Jack Mauldin's attorneys since early this morning, Miss Vance."

"Darcy. Please."

"Darcy," he blushed, saying my name, even though his face was still serious. "I don't blame you for being upset about Mauldin Enterprises wanting to plop that road and big, showy entrance right beside your home, I would be too. It's going to be hideous. Vegas meets Myrtle Beach."

Oh. My. God. I hadn't given any thought as to *what* they were building, just that they'd destroyed my property. I opened my briefcase and yanked out the stack of forms I'd downloaded off of the Internet. I'd already filled out a cease-and-desist appeal and an appeal contesting the construction of the entrance altogether. To those I'd added what basically amounted to a legal argument, citing every instance I could find to support my case. I pushed the impressive stack of papers toward him. With a pained look, he pushed an equally impressive stack of papers in front of me.

"After Mr. Mauldin's attorneys called this morning, I did some digging and pulled the permits to see if they are in order, and they are."

"But this just came out of nowhere. Shouldn't there have been some kind of notice posted, or at least a public hearing?"

He shook his head. "Not for that part of the county; it's mostly marsh, and the tides, the coastline moves. As you may or may not know, because your property is on the bay, over time, thanks to the salt and the tides, the irons marking your property line basically disintegrated. You signed a document at closing acknowledging the ambiguity of the southern property line."

He pulled a document off of his pile and pushed it my way. I scanned it, then took in my signature at the bottom. The letters were bigger and loopier than normal, a sign of how giddy I'd been that day. For all I knew, there could be a document in his stack that showed I'd signed away my soul to the devil. How could I have been so incredibly stupid? I was a lawyer for God's sake, I knew better than to sign anything that wasn't spelled out to the letter. But when I'd been assured no one could ever build on the abutment, I was thinking house or barn. Not a freaking road.

"Once it's gotten this far, Miss Vance, there's not a lot that you can do, other than stall the construction for a few weeks. Maybe a few months. It might make you feel better for now, but I'm afraid it won't help you in the long run."

My brain skipped over the futile part and went straight to esthetics. "So this entrance, we're talking Elvis-chapel-by-the-sea ugly?"

"After the plans are filed with the county, they're public record. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes. Please." He left the room and returned with a set of plans tucked under his arm. When he unfurled them, I couldn't speak.

I stared at the huge gaudy fountain that looked like it would start at the side of my gate those assholes had destroyed and extend eight hundred feet.

"The fountain is a hundred and fifty feet wide and four hundred feet long on either side of the road." His fingers brushed across the entrance of Mimosa House, before flipping to the next page, which was a schematic of some sort. The designer had labeled it Bellagio II. "I understand it's like the one in Vegas. It even changes colors."

"But the county has no authority to take my land to build a fountain." I was trying hard to remain calm, but the muscle over my eye was twitching like

crazy and my voice sounded less confident, even to me.

"Well, that's where the recent change comes in. They exercised eminent domain to build the road, which now cuts through here." He pointed to the entrance of my property. "The plan is to bring in dirt to build up this part of the marsh so that half of the fountain extends into the marsh, or at least that's the illusion, the other half of the fountain is on the opposite side of the road."

"So all the rooms on the front of my house will face this crazy fountain with its *neon orange*—" I stabbed at the schematic. "*Chameleon green and turquoise lights?*"

"I'm afraid so."

"No." I would not go down without a fight, I pushed the stack of papers in front of him again. "I'm filing these today with your office, which by law buys me seven days. And I'll be filing an injunction against Mauldin Enterprises." Which should buy me a couple of months. Maybe they'd be so anxious to build their damn road, they'd move it somewhere else and restore my gate and the landscaping around it to its former glory. But what would I do in the mean time?

No. Hell, no, this had to be settled and soon. The last thing I needed was another reason for paying guests to stay away, and once the Historical Society got wind of this, they'd kick out my application on aesthetics alone.

Jim Bo blew out a breath and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Look, Miss Vance, I'll be honest, I know Magnolia Bay well, and I don't like this anymore than you do. All I can do is submit your appeal at the county council meeting next month. But I have to warn you, Mauldin Enterprises is very influential in Charleston County. It's no different with this board. Can't you just move your entrance?"

"Move my entrance? At my own expense?"

"Well, neither Mauldin or the county is legally obligated to replace any fencing and that's what your gate was deemed. Maybe," he pointed to the driveway that was the actual border between Mr. Hunsucker's property and mine. I could just see him hosing down my guests as they arrived. "You could share an entrance with your neighbor. I see that in a lot of the newer developments."

And just leave the other half of the gate sticking up like a sore thumb? Because I sure as hell didn't have the money to level it and haul it away. And what about all those damn hibiscuses I planted? No, Arcadia Dunes would have to put *their* entrance somewhere else. "Please, Mr. Cramer, just start the appeal process for me."

"File your injunction. Maybe you'll get some traction there. I really am sorry, Miss Vance." I stood and shook his hand. "When Mauldin's people called this morning, they mentioned that you're a lawyer."

"Yes." And I had no desire to ever be one again.

"Maybe you'll have some luck with the courts, but it really is true that it's



who you know that counts. And Big Jack Mauldin seems to have everybody on his side. If you've got some strings, I suggest you pull them."

Yeah? Well that helped a lot.

The Jeep joined the rush hour traffic headed north on Interstate 526. I racked my brain, but didn't know a soul in the Charleston court system. But I knew someone who did. Dalton Prichard. I'd deleted him from my phone, and from my life. Sure I'd memorized his phone numbers, but was I really desperate enough to ask the man who trashed my heart for a favor?

My phone pinged with a text, my bank's daily love letter announcing how much money I didn't have. Oh, hell.

"Darcy?" He picked up on the first ring. My eyes squeezed shut for a second, which isn't a good thing when you're on the Westmorland Bridge. "Are you there?"

"Yes." Oh God, could I really do this? Maybe I could just claim I was butt dialing or drunk dialing, after all it was five o'clock somewhere.

"We've missed you around here," he paused. "I've missed you."

"Don't." God, I wanted to hang up. I'd rather drive off of the very tall bridge I was stuck on than ask him for a favor.

It was hard enough being a lawyer and hating it, especially when I got a great big fat paycheck on a regular basis because I was so good at it. I'd socked money away and kept my dream of owning a B&B in a quiet historic community to myself. I'm not even sure I believed I'd take the leap; in a way, I had Dalton to thank that.

"How have you been, Darcy? I heard you were in Charleston." How in the hell did he know that? He sounded like he cared. Then again, he had the ability to ooze sincerity when he needed to; it came in handy in the courtroom or when he needed to hide the tryst he was having at the same time he was having me.

I'd been on my way back to the office that day. It was a Friday, after seven o'clock. I'd given the closing argument to the biggest case of my career just before five. The verdict had come back much sooner than I'd expected, which usually meant bad news for the defense. But in this case, it was great news for my client and for me.

I'd tried to call Dalton at the office, but he didn't answer his direct line. I tried his assistant, still nothing. I told Siri to call him on his cell, but it went straight to voice mail. After leaving him a message, I told Siri to call my assistant, Chloe, with no answer, I left a message.

"Put on your dancing shoes, girlfriend, and meet me and Dalton at The Cosmopolitan around eleven. We're going to grab some dinner, then meet you there." I was positively giddy. "Hey, and bring a date. You're too young and too beautiful to work so damn much."

I swung by my condo, put on my best party clothes, then headed out to Dalton's place. On the way, I got one of those annoying delayed voicemails that someone sends and you get it hours or days later. Chloe had called



around noon and was frantic, trying to find a file that needed to be emailed to our San Francisco office. The office was on the way to Dalton's midtown apartment, and with the three-hour time difference, I could send the file and save the day. Again. Which, I admit, is heady and one of the few things I did like about being a lawyer.

The office was deserted, which was no shock on a Friday. I peeked into Dalton's office, it was dark and empty. I smiled, imaging my big, gorgeous guy sitting in the horrendous Atlanta traffic with his cell phone silenced because he'd forgotten to un-silence it a lot lately. I pulled out my phone and tried him again. Nothing.

"Hey, baby, leaving another message. Guess you have your phone off. Anyway, I can't wait to see you and celebrate."

I hurried down the hall in my dancing shoes and threw open my office door to see Chloe. Spread eagle on my desk. Dalton's head jerked up from between her legs, and he said that one little word I will always remember.

"*Shit.*"

I could have bent the steel on the bridge with the death grip my fingers had on my phone. Was I really desperate enough to ask Dalton Prichard for anything?

"Darcy, I'm glad you called. I'm so..."

"Look, Dalton. You are the last person I wanted to call."

"I don't blame you, but I'm glad you did. After—you didn't return my calls—then you left town so suddenly, I..."

"Okay, stop right there." *Don't go ballistic. Don't make him hang up on you.* I had a new life. I didn't care about him or Chloe. But the scars from what the two of them had done to me were still fresh. "I need to finish because I'm having a really hard time saying what I need to say." Without that Tumblr-like snippet of Dalton's head popping out of Chloe's crotch looping over and over again in my brain.

"Okay. I'm sorry. Whatever you want, whatever you need, it's yours."

Wow. That was easy. "Is your father still a judge?" A stupid question. Once a judge always a judge, especially one at the state supreme court level.

The only thing Dalton hated more than losing a case was trading favors with his father. So I wasn't counting on his cooperation. "Yes, but he's retiring soon. Darcy, if you need anything, please, let me help you."

Part of me wanted to scream at him for what he did to me. Part of me wanted to ask him how long it had been going on. I didn't think I cared anymore, but maybe I did. Maybe knowing all of the dirty little details was just tying up loose ends, unfinished business. But let's be honest, what good would it do to know any of that?

"I need to get on the right judge's docket ASAP, tomorrow preferably, to file an injunction against Mauldin Enterprises, a developer in Charleston County. Can you make that happen?"

"Yes, of course. Whatever you want."

"Thank you." Oh, God, did I really just say that? Restraint will drain the hell out of you, and I was beyond drained.

"I'd like to see you, Darcy."

"Dalton, what you did, what Chloe did to me—" Frankly I'd seen enough of Dalton Prichard to last me until hell froze over because that's what I swore would have to happen before I spoke to him again. "Seeing you won't change anything. So no. Just do this for me."

After I ended the call, Dalton called me back in less than ten minutes making me think he'd used his own Charleston connections and not his father's. I had a judge's name, a nine a.m. appointment next Friday to file my injunction, the day after the Historical Society meeting and a week before the home tours began. This was either lining up to be a huge win or a disastrous last effort to save my dream, and after being desperate enough to ask Dalton Prichard for a favor, I needed a shower.



# Chapter Eight

Trent's shoulder screamed as his paddle dug harder into the choppy water. He and Tanner had been at it for two hours, paddling against the tide to Capers Island, not saying a word, which was fine by Trent.

Six days ago, Trent had Darcy wrapped around him. So hot. So willing. And he'd left. He'd swung by Mauldin Enterprises' office and had gotten an earful from his dad about Darcy's complaint with the County Planning Commission. His dad didn't think the commission was taking the complaint seriously, but somebody over there disliked Big Jack enough to follow protocol, and not turn her down flat. Not that Trent thought that was possible. Darcy Vance was a hard woman to say no to.

But Trent had said no to her, in a big way. He hadn't called or texted her. He thought not seeing her would be easy. But he'd been tormented by the memory of what her body felt like against his and that kiss that made him wonder exactly *when* he'd fallen for her.

Without Darcy, without the current that passed between them, he felt on edge. Strung out. And that was just from a kiss. Well, not just any kiss, but still. And what had he done since that kiss? He'd run, or kayaked to the point of exhaustion. He'd worked his ass off, almost begging workers or his dad to fight with him, and if they didn't, he was a pain in their asses until they did. Anything to get his mind off Darcy.

But then this morning, he rolled out of bed and had almost blown off going out in the kayaks with Tanner, almost strapped on his tool belt and showed up on her doorstep. Maybe with Stacia's coffee, definitely with something sweet. He doubted she would have forgiven him so easily for seemingly falling off the face of the planet after promising he was on her side. But with that great big to-do list, she probably wouldn't have turned down the help. Or maybe she would have slammed the door in his face, leaving him holding a frou-frou coffee drink and a bag of cinnamon rolls. And who could

blame her?

Tanner slowed down when they got to northern tip of the island, but Trent kept digging hard until they were on the south end. They pulled the boats onto the beach. Tanner unstrapped the cooler on the front of his kayak and headed for the Boneyard. He plopped down on the sand, unzipped the cooler and offered Trent a bottle of water.

"This never gets old," Tanner said.

Trent and his brothers had been coming here and to Bulls Island for as long as he could remember. It was a short boat ride compared to the half hour it took to get to beaches on the Isle of Palms or Sullivan's Island, and probably the most peaceful place on the planet. Uninhabited. A National Wildlife Refuge.

When they were little, the Boneyard had been their playground, huge trees upended by erosion their roots bleached white by the sun. As Trent got older, and a deserted beach was his idea of torture, he and his brothers had stopped coming, except for Tanner, which probably explained why his excursion business suited him. He loved his job, and with a place like this for an office, who could blame him?

"You going to say anything?" Tanner drained the rest of his water and took a protein bar out of his pack. "Or are you just going to brood? Over a girl."

"Is that why you brought me here, Lucy? You thinking you're going to analyze me for five cents?"

Tanner laughed and tossed Trent a bar. "I'd be the last person to try to figure your ugly ass out, Peanut. I just got sick of you fighting with dad or moping around that house I'm renting you, which by the way, I have someone interested in buying."

"Bullshit. The realtor hasn't even shown it to anyone."

"They call the owner, asshole, not the tenant. You were at work, so I told them to go on in. It's a nice couple from Cleveland, Pittsburgh, someplace up north."

"Isn't that always the case?"

Tanner let out a deep sigh. "Can't blame those snow shovelers for wanting a piece of the Low Country. It's a cash sale. A good offer, unless you want to make me a better one."

"And why would I do that?"

"You tell me, brother. Are you staying or going?"

Every cell in Trent's brain screamed time was up. He was ready to move on. But to what? He'd been so busy living life on his terms, he'd never given any thought to life beyond golf. Did he even have a life beyond golf? The idea of leaving Magnolia Bay had never bothered him before. Until now.

"Don't know yet," Trent said.

"Well, it's not like you can't afford to sit on your ass or be a pain in mine." Trent laughed and gave his brother a one-finger salute. "And then there's the girl."



Trent didn't react, just stared out at the horizon across the Atlantic.

"I meant what I said," Tanner wasn't laughing anymore.

"About what?"

"If she's yours, say so. Otherwise..."

Trent finished the sentence in his head. He still wanted Darcy, but he believed she deserved better than he could give her. Maybe Tanner was better. He'd had a couple of long-term relationships and a broken engagement that had landed him a best friend instead of a wife. He probably was much better suited for Darcy than Trent was.

"Okay," Tanner said, heading back to the kayaks. "You've had fair warning."

"Don't even think about it." Trent shoulder checked his brother hard and got to the boats first. He pushed off of the bank, and started back home at a furious pace.

\* \* \*

In my fruit bowl, I had an ink pen, an expired pizza coupon, my Kindle I read during meals. And I had my very annoying cellphone that only pinged with love letters from my bank and calls from everyone I knew other than Trent. And Chloe. Not that I'm lumping him in the same category as her. Although Dalton had called several times, I hadn't picked up. I'd listened to the voicemails just in case he was reneging on the favor he did for me. Still nothing from Trent.

I thought about him every five seconds, and by now, there weren't many good thoughts. I was grateful I had my house to keep me working like a crazy woman. My days usually started by six and sometimes didn't end until one or two in the morning. If I'd met and fallen for him earlier... Yes I had fallen for him, either that or I was checking my phone every five seconds for nothing. I'd probably already have the house open for business. As it stood now, I wouldn't be as done as is possible with a house like mine before the day of reckoning with the Historical Society tomorrow. Not that it mattered.

My cell rang and vibrated in the fruit bowl. Only one person would be calling this early in the morning.

"Hey, Stacia, I thought you had exams this week."

"Can't a girl get out of studying for a little bit? I'm going to Bottoms Up tonight for a drink. Maybe get some of that crab dip that's sin on a pita chip. You should come."

"Better not. I'm on schedule to finish next week, do a soft opening until Memorial Day weekend." Thanks to working myself into oblivion, trying to forget about Trent.

"You still sound worried. Is it the house?" asked the girl whose greatest worry was trying to decide if she liked her hot rocker boyfriend's hair tied back or down. "Or because you haven't heard from Trent?"

Living in a small town has a completely different set of rules than the ones I'd operated under in Atlanta. In Magnolia Bay everybody knows your

business, and if they don't, they'll keep chipping away until they do. So, after Trent disappeared and exceeded the mandatory twenty-four hour window to call me, and after I'd had one too many microwave s'mores, and the better part of a bottle of cheap wine, I'd confided in Stacia.

"Miranda says if you don't want to kick Trent's ass, she'll be happy to do it for you. You should let her put the fear of God in him, Darcy. It sure would be fun to watch."

Great. Now all the Chicks knew. "There won't be any ass kicking, and if there is, I am more than capable of doing it myself."

"Are you still going to dinner with him after the Historical Society meeting tomorrow?"

Was that still on? The date, not the meeting. While I was extremely grateful, Trent had gotten my application on the board's itinerary, I didn't know what I would do if he called out of the blue or showed up on my doorstep, with or without cinnamon rolls, to take me to the meeting. I sure as hell would be cordial, but I couldn't promise I would be after that. As much as I hated to admit it, I'd let Trent Mauldin in. I'd given him the power to hurt me.

But I was hopeless. If I wasn't dreaming about him, and by the way there were only two of us in those scorching hot dreams now, no Dalton, I was thinking about him. Him and that stupid kiss. Not the one in my kitchen, although that one was bone-meltingly good, the one when we were lying on my bed. He'd kissed me back the same way I kissed him, like his life depended on it, and somewhere in all that, I'd stupidly offered up a little piece of my heart. And whether he'd know it or not, Trent had taken it. Then he was gone and there was nothing. Not a word. Not even crickets chirping.

"I don't know, Stacia."

"He likes you. He wants you bad."

"And you know this because?" Jesus, she was twenty-two. What did she know about men?

Maybe more than I did, after all Stacia had Sawyer. "It's classic avoidance behavior." And an almost-psychology degree. "He probably doesn't know what to do with his feelings, so he's put some space between you and him. Makes sense for a guy who's always had millions of women fawning over him." Thanks for *that* visual image. "He'll be back. I'd bet on it."

\* \* \*

It was almost dark by the time I tossed the trowel into my gardening bench. Stiff and sore, I backpedaled away from the house and surveyed my handiwork. Maybe spending a fortune on the stucco and iron entrance and the landscaping wasn't such a great idea, but the landscaping was worth every penny. It certainly made the place look legit, almost majestic. Without a prejudiced bone in my body, I proclaimed Mimosa House the best B&B in all of Magnolia Bay.

To celebrate that honor, I made s'mores in the microwave for dinner and

had another glass of wine, this time, one of the last bottles of the good stuff I used to collect. A rich, complex cabernet, a very grateful client had given me for saving his ass.

The greatest thing about having a former brothel restored to its former glory is having twelve bathrooms. Twelve new but antique-looking claw foot tubs to choose from instead of retreating to my cubbyhole in the basement with no windows and a plastic shower stall. Phoebe's room called to me. I grabbed a glass of wine started upstairs.

My favorite thing, just after I bought the house was walking around the dilapidated place and seeing it the way it was a hundred and fifty years ago, the way it could be again. Decadent. Beautiful. With each room, I tried to get a feel for the women who'd lived there. Phoebe's room overlooked the bay on the north end of the house, staring down Bloom Manor. It was the shabbiest room before the renovations, but from the first moment I stepped into it, I pictured it all white. Billowy. And even with its contentious history, peaceful.

In 1917, Phoebe Beaumont was deemed a miracle baby, the only child of her fifty-five-year-old mother, Lissa Beaumont, the madam of Mimosa House. Not long after Phoebe's birth, her mother retired comfortably and devoted herself to raising her daughter. Phoebe was said to have grown up with Rembert Bloom and was the love of his life, but Rembert's family wouldn't abide him marrying the madam's daughter.

With no hope of ever being Rembert's bride, Phoebe gave up and married a gentleman from Savannah. Rembert was so brokenhearted, he vowed never to marry, but relented in 1950 and took Violet, who was twenty years younger than him, for his wife.

According to some, Phoebe was Rembert's lover until the day he died. She would steal away from Savannah and meet him at Mimosa House. No wonder Violet Bloom hated my house; it was a constant reminder of Rembert's love for another woman, of being his second choice.

I stripped, wondering what Phoebe would have thought of this pretty darn impressive copy of the original claw foot tub, complete with a Jacuzzi. Slipping into the warm water, I added a few drops of lilac oil to the bubbles, took a sip of wine before opening my book. Before I knew it, I was forty pages into the novel and the water had soothed my tired muscles. I was beyond relaxed—until my shorts began to vibrate on the tile floor. I wiped my hands on a towel and fished my phone out of the pocket.

"Hey." One little word from him sent warmth snaking down my belly and it had nothing to do with the water temperature.

My traitorous nipples spiked above the water. "Hi." What was I doing? He hadn't called in days. Six to be exact.

"What are you doing?"

My point exactly. "Gardening." I lied, although technically there *was* enough dirt under my nails to grow corn.

"At night? Want some help?"

My phone nearly fell in the water at the thought of Trent helping me. Now. I barely caught it, but he heard the sound of the water sloshing and laughed.

"Sounds like you're busy."

"Okay, I'm in the tub."

"Why didn't you just say so?"

Why didn't I just say a lot of things, like why the hell haven't you called me? But hearing his voice made me feel more naked than naked. Aroused. And as it had been so long since I'd had sex—needy. And I don't do needy. Well, that's not true. I did it once with Dalton and that was enough.

"I'm tired." *So freaking exhausted.* "So, yes, I'm in a bubble bath with a good book and a glass of wine. I earned it."

"Not arguing with you," he said, which disappointed me a little. With Dalton, arguing about small things was like foreplay, and who doesn't like that? Is that what I was doing with Trent? I blushed hard, my skin glowing pink below the white bubbles.

"I'm sorry I didn't call, Darcy. I think about you all the time. I—Jesus—I suck at this."

*Yes, you do suck at this, but no matter how hard I've tried, I can't stop thinking about you either, comparing other guys to you. Dreaming of you naked, that kind of thing.*

Why couldn't I just tell him I was glad he called? Or to screw off? Why did he make me so damn nervous? And why was I even thinking about Trent in the first place. Was he just a pretty distraction from the fact that I was getting dangerously close to the point in my story where living happily ever after in Mimosa House looked impossible?

"I hope you'll let me make it up to you. Take you to the meeting tomorrow night, buy you dinner. *Not* that that would, you know make it right. I just want to—Christ, I just want to see you. So, can I pick you up tomorrow at six-thirty?"

I ignored his question. "Any advice for tomorrow?"

He paused for a moment, so long, I looked at my phone to see if the call had dropped.

"I hope you have a tough hide."

"I do." Except where you're concerned. "Anything else?"

"Dress..." Another long silence. Remembering the last time he saw me in all my glory, I squeezed my eyes shut. He probably thinks I'm going to show up in Daisy Dukes and a tie top. "Professionally. I know that sounds stupid, but it'll help a little with Camellia. I'm not sure anything will sway Daisy, but this is your shot."

"Got it."

"So, you're not going to let me take you to the meeting? To dinner?"

In my head, I was screaming, *say no. Just say no.* But my stupid heart was doing Olympic medal worthy gymnastics over a million different connotations for what *take me* might entail. "Okay. Tomorrow. The meeting.

Food. That's it." *Yeah, right.*

My phone pinged again. My bank, not Trent. I looked at the balance, and cried.





## Chapter Nine

Trent swallowed hard as a pair of black do-me stilettos came into view at the top of the stairs, long luscious legs followed. She was wearing a short black skirt and some kind of turquois colored high-necked top that had hot teacher written all over it. Darcy gave him a slight smile and flipped her long gorgeous red hair over her shoulder. Yep, she still was pissed. But damn, she was beautiful. Before Trent knew it, he was half way up the stairs. He wanted to scoop her up and pick up where they'd left off days ago, but it was apparent by the look on her face that wasn't happening. She pushed passed him and headed out the front door.

"You look amazing." He started to kiss her on the cheek, but that didn't seem like a good idea just now.

"Well you said professional. Guess this is better than what I usually wear. Huh?"

Her pajamas immediately came to mind, that tiny tank top and shorts that had barely covered her sweet ass the morning she stopped everyone, including him, in their tracks and kicked the guys who knocked down her gate off of her property.

"Not a chance."

He opened the car door for her. She flashed him a smile, but it came nowhere close to meeting her eyes. He could see she was tired, and wasn't at all sure about this, whatever it was. A Date?

He drove a couple of blocks to the Historical Society and parked. There were only a few cars in the parking lot; Camellia and Daisy hadn't arrived yet. He offered his hand and suggested they stroll the gardens that backed up to the society's property until it was time for the meeting. It was apparent she didn't even want to give him that. But then she did, and that thing happened again when he touched her, that current that had annoyed him and enticed him in equal measure.

They walked past the bronze plaque that said his ancestors founded the gardens that had been part of the Bloom plantation in the early 1800s, before Magnolia Bay was founded. The plaque told the story of the gardens that were destroyed during a Confederate battle, how the roses, some kind of pink climber, had risen from the ashes. That same variety now covered the long arbors, lining the walkway that ends at a white gazebo in the middle of the gardens.

They barely got past a stand of sunset-colored roses beside the entrance when Darcy pulled away and sat down on a bench and let out a deep sigh.

"If it's all the same to you, Trent, can we just sit here for a minute, before it's time to go inside?"

He nodded and sat down beside her. He wanted to put his arms around her, but she was giving off a vibe that said she was a half-step away from being irreparably crushed or crushing something. Somebody. Maybe him.

He told himself to back off, but he couldn't. He ran his hand over her bare arm and felt the same energy that passed between them every single time he touched her. Her shaky smile shattered him. She was trying so damn hard to look strong, confident. But he saw straight through her, past the expensive clothes and makeup, past the vibe. She was used to being in charge and was no more accustomed to having circumstance dictate her life than he was. Had he done this to her? Was it his aunts? His father? "You okay?"

She shook her head and raked her hand over her face. She wasn't about to give him anything, and even if she did, he didn't deserve it.

"Darcy, talk to me."

"This is *so* not what I thought it would be." And when she looked at him, he knew she wasn't just talking about her house.

"Then *talk* to me."

"No." She looked out across the gardens, not at him. "Maybe." Another long silence. "I've always been good under pressure, at someone else's ass. I was great at it, but this is for me now. Everything I want is riding on the next two meetings, and I'm not sure I have it in me to fight anymore."

"Two meetings?"

"I'm seeing a judge tomorrow to file an injunction against your dad's company, Trent, and I have to look at this logically. As much as you say you're on my side, the truth is you work for your dad. There are huge conflicting issues."

"I meant what I said, and I *am* on your side." She leveled him with a look. Okay, he really had screwed up. But he wanted to fix this. "I like you, Darcy. That scares the hell out of me, but I'm not conflicted about anything when it comes to you." That sounded good, and it was more true than not. He was a man and she was a woman for God's sake, there'd always be *stuff* between them, but for the first time in his life, Trent wanted to stick around, see exactly what that stuff was, and work it out.

Three cars pulled into the parking lot behind them in quick succession.

Two of them his aunt's black Mercedes. Glancing at his watch, they had ten minutes before the meeting started. Two more cars pulled in and parked. Board members he knew Darcy needed to meet.

"Looks like the meeting's going to start soon," she said. "We'd better go inside."

"Darcy, look at me."

She looked like a total stranger compared to the fiery redhead from a few days ago. It was clear all the bullshit was getting to her, and what he'd done hadn't helped. She'd worked herself to the bone and was hanging on by a thread, no doubt Camellia and Daisy would finish her off. Then Darcy would be done, and by her own admission, if she couldn't make a go out of her B&B, gone.

"I can't do this. The house. You," she whispered. "I should just go."

"No. This is your shot. If you don't have it in you to finesse this meeting, then fake it. You've come too far to give up." And he didn't want to let her go.

She nodded solemnly and blew out a deep breath. "Okay, then, it's show time." She stood, long, tall, gorgeous. "I've done this a million times. Not the exact same thing as when I was in a courtroom, but I've got this."

She'd said that for her own benefit, not his, but he knew what she meant. He'd done the same thing over the years, told himself whatever he needed to suck it up, even when he had nothing left to give for interviews, in tournaments. "Then let's go."

\* \* \*

Daisy called the meeting to order and with raised eyebrows noted that Trent's cousin and board member, Willa Dunn, and Willa's former arch nemesis turned lover, Knox Loveless were absent. Interesting. Trent had no idea Knox and Willa were board members. Or that they were a thing, until about ten minutes into the mind-numbingly boring meeting, the pair came in and took their rightful places, both with just-fucked smiles on their faces.

After apologizing for being late, Willa looked up and seemed just as surprised to see Trent. She and Knox were apparently the two youngest board members, and if Darcy had a shot at getting anyone on her side, it would be them. Even though they seemed to rarely agree on anything, except maybe disappearing and resurfacing with a certain glow.

Most of the issues the board dealt with had to do with the upcoming home tour. Advertising. Marketing. One of the B&B owners complained that he always got the same docent every year for both the spring and fall home tours. He didn't name names but said the woman was so terrible, people didn't get much past the foyer and they were out the door and on to the next house on the tour. He went on for several minutes on how he believed the lousy docent affected his business.

"We'll address the issue, but all of our docents are volunteers," Daisy said.

"Well, give her to someone else," the man snipped. "I can't afford having

her at my place again. The tours are extremely important to my business, they are a kick off for each season, and I've seen a definite decline since she was assigned to my house."

Trent glanced at Darcy who wouldn't have a docent if things didn't go her way, much less a lousy one. Her face was pale, but not in the creamy sort of way when he first met her. She looked almost scared, like maybe she was getting ready to throw in the towel altogether.

"Our final item of business," Daisy looked over the top of her reading glasses at Trent, "is a request by Miss Darcy Vance to add Mimosa House to the Historical Society registry."

"No way," one of the elderly board members piped up. "We'd lose our integrity as a historic community. We'd be a laughingstock."

"And the majority of us here, depend on the town's reputation as a historic destination to make our living. We don't need anyone calling attention to Magnolia Bay's black eye," huffed a woman with two disturbingly well-behaved children on either side of her.

"And I can only imagine how the house will be marketed," Camellia added. "I know of a B&B in Dallas where they play up the unseemly history and even show up at the door dressed like saloon girls."

"May I say something?" Darcy stood and didn't wait for permission. "I know the place you're talking about, it's campy, and her methods—"

"Miss Vance, you are out of order," Daisy snapped, banging gavel.

"Yes, I am out of order. I'm out of patience. Hell, I'm out of time. More than anything, I want to be part of this historical community. I've proven that by making Mimosa House as beautiful and elegant as when it was built a hundred and fifty years ago. I've poured everything I have into that house and I've worked too hard to turn it into some kind of lewd joke."

"But you do intend to play up the history," Camellia said.

"Am I going to greet guests dressed like the madam of the house? No!" Darcy said. "But I can't deny the history of the house any more than I can deny my own history or any of you can deny yours. And that is ultimately what we're selling here. Guests come to Magnolia Bay because they want to step back in time. And they keep coming back in droves because the historic community is strong, committed. I bought Mimosa House for that very reason. I've taken my obligations and responsibilities to the community seriously. It's a beautiful inn. It's my home."

Darcy's voice cracked with emotion. Her posture was more pleading than that of an experienced litigator.

*Don't throw yourself on their mercy. Don't show Daisy or Camellia how vulnerable you are.*

She clasped her hands behind her back, they were shaking. "But I—my business won't survive without the Historical Society's validation, without the advantage of being on the home tours, and in your advertising and marketing. I ask you to lay aside any notions you have about the house, about me. I ask



you to add Mimosa House to your register.”

There was silence. Willa looked like she was on the verge of tears from Darcy’s impassioned plea. Knox was rubbing her back and looked like it was killing him not to put his arms around her.

“I move we table Miss Vance’s application,” Camellia chirped. The word *indefinitely* was implied. A blue haired man who’d been asleep for most of the meeting seconded the motion. The board voted, and it was over.

\* \* \*

“Well, that sucked.”

“I’m sorry, Darcy.” Trent thought he could save her house. Make things right.

“Don’t be. It was the worst closing argument I’ve ever given. I didn’t deserve to win.”

He cranked up the car, backed out of the driveway, and started up Francis Marion Way toward the Highway 17. He was going to turn left to head toward Charleston. Darcy put her hand on his arm. “Can we do dinner another time, Trent?”

“Sure. Want me to take you home?”

She nodded.

Mimosa House was just a few blocks away and when it came into view, he glanced at her. He could see that she loved this place, that the possibility of losing it was killing her. And there was a lot to love. The million-dollar view of the bay, the house itself was massive and beautiful. He wondered what would happen to the place if she did lose it? Would it sit unloved, unkempt? Would his dad buy it since it was on the edge of his property? Or would the Historical Society buy it and level it, so they could pretend it never existed?

Trent parked and killed the engine. His knuckles brushed across Darcy’s cheek, and pulled away. He shouldn’t be touching her, wanting her. It was a primal thing that he understood, but he had no idea where the need to protect her came from.

She looked at him with such heartache he reached for her anyway. She let him hold her, her head nestled into the crook of his neck. She was trembling.

“Come inside? Please.”

“Darcy, I like you. I want to come inside, but you’re hurt. And as bad as I feel about what happened back there, I’m not sure I can be in the same room and not touch you, so maybe I should just go.”

“I want you to stay.” She got out of the car and he trailed after her when she opened the front door. He stopped in the foyer, at war with himself. Did he want her? Hell, yes, but not like this. She was hurt, fragile. She started up the stairs, looking back of her shoulder with tears in her eyes. A silent invitation.

She’d come so far and bet everything on this house. He knew she needed to feel something other than defeated. He couldn’t help himself. He followed her to the south end of the house, overlooking the thousands of acres his

father owned. While the view was blue sky and oyster beds, marsh grass and scrub oaks, it would soon have a golf course surrounded by high dollar condos and McMansions.

"This is Lissa's room," she whispered. She sounded like a docent giving a tour, but she was tugging at the buttons on her skirt, tears spilling down her face. "She was the madam of the house. Her room is the most opulent of the twelve."

The black skirt fell to the floor and she walked to the mini bar fridge. High heels. A peach-colored thong. Long red hair falling in soft waves down her back. She opened fridge that was stuffed with champagne and fancy chocolates. Swiping at her tears, she chose a bottle with a red bow on it, and then walked back to him like she was his present.

He took the bottle. God, he wanted her. But she was wrecked and seemed desperate to feel anything other than defeated. As much as he wanted her, it seemed wrong, like he would be taking advantage of her.

"This isn't a good idea, Darcy. You're upset."

"Which is a great reason to drown my sorrows," she ran her finger over the label. "An even better reason to break out the good stuff," she shrugged. When he didn't open the bottle, she took it from him, popped it open herself and filled two crystal flutes before handing one to him.

"Is that what we're doing? Drowning sorrows?"

"With all my freaking sorrows, we might just go through the whole damn fridge and start on the commercial one downstairs," she forced a smile and threw back the glass in one unladylike gulp.

He knew what she wanted. What she thought she needed. Toe curling, forget-about-impending-doom sex. He'd felt the same way when he left the tour, and he knew as broken as she was, she would be even more wrecked afterwards. And where would that leave her? Where would that leave the two of them?

She slid her hands down the hard planes of his chest, then started unbuttoning his shirt.

"I should go." He said it, but he couldn't move. She gave him a look, not the pillow talk she wanted to hear. The look dissolved into pure sin. She pushed his shirt off his shoulder and nipped at his collarbone, then blew on the spot. "Darcy..."

"Shhh. Don't talk."

The shirt fell to the floor, and she looked at her consolation prize. Her face took his breath away. She pulled her silky top over her head and tossed it aside. Her lacy peach bra matched her thong, and she knew she was killing him.

She ran her hands over his chest, his abs. "Not at all the way I pictured a golfer's body." God, he needed to stop this. But for the life of him, he couldn't. All he could do was stand there with his fists clenched at his sides and fight for control.

She kissed the pulse at the base of his throat, his body was rock hard, so very ready to give her what she wanted. She trailed her fingers down his belly until they rested on his belt buckle.

"Darcy." She pulled his head down and kissed him like she needed him to breathe, to live. "We have to stop."

"No," she whispered. Her fingers started unbuckling his belt so slowly, teasing both of them unmercifully. He whispered another protest that didn't sound very convincing at all.

"Don't make me beg, Trent." She trailed hot openmouthed kisses across his jawline to his earlobe. "I want to feel good. Make me feel good."

He grabbed her wrists, pinning them behind her back, pressing her breasts against him. Not what he was trying to do. "There is nothing I'd like better than to spread across that bed and take you as many times as humanly possible, but you're not ready for this."

"You're wrong, Trent," she dipped her head, kissing him just above his nipple. "I. Am. So. Very. Ready." And oh, how he wanted to trail a finger up her thigh to see for himself.

He pressed his forehead against the top of her head. "I like you, Darcy. I already fucked up once, don't make me do it again," he said. "Look, I know you're hurting. Talk to me."

"No," she whispered. "I'm done talking."

His body was screaming for him to take her up against the wall. Now. But he knew if he did, it would change things between them, and not for the better. "I have to go."

By some miracle, he backed away from her.

"Yeah. Maybe you should." She was angry with him, and that was okay. He could deal with angry. It was the sadness and the brokenness that worried him.

He grabbed his shirt and slipped it on. She picked up the champagne bottle and her glass and slinked across the room like sex on stilettos and spread herself across the chaise in front of the window. She lifted her hair up so that when she let go of it, it flowed over the arm of the chair as she settled onto her side, facing the sunset.

The light coming through floor to ceiling windows bathed the gentle swell of her hips, her long legs. Even with her back to him, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He stood there for a moment, taking in the sight he might never see again.

And then he left.



# Chapter Ten

**W**anna feel stupid? Try playing a hot sex kitten for the very first time in your life. Then begging, just enough to make you feel even more like a fool when the bedroom door closes behind the sex god as he *leaves* you lying on your new Pottery Barn chaise with icy cold air from the damned air conditioning vent blowing on your bare ass.

Of course the Dragon Lady had no sex kitten experience; she never needed any. Although Trent didn't know that. Or hell, maybe I was so *bad* at it, he did know. Maybe that was why he left instead of some bullshit excuse that he liked me too much to give me what I needed. Well, I had a long list of things I *needed*, and—aside from an endless supply of money and a good mani/pedi—getting laid was now at the top of said list.

I drained the champagne flute before the sun slide below the horizon, set the glass on the floor and finished the rest from the bottle, knowing full well the stuff always made my head feel like it was going to explode. But it was just wrong to waste something so expensive, seductive. Unfortunately, I didn't get drunk, only angrier, and all I had to show for my \$150 bottle of bubbly was chill bumps over ninety percent of my body and those little burps that never stop.

Kicking off my shoes, I stomped downstairs, threw the bottle in the recycle bin to save the planet, and went to my cave to put on something more suitable before raiding the pantry.

After the Dalton fiasco and having vowed *never* to lower myself by eating the brownie mix out of the box again, I got out the obligatory egg and cooking oil. Oh, and walnuts, along with *two* boxes of Betty Crocker mix and got to work. Yes, there would be hell to pay, and it would be in the form of rich chocolate fudge, which sounds redundant but is completely necessary when one is trying to soothe her smarting ego and write a kickass legal brief.

With sticky chocolate fingers flying across my keyboard, I managed to



write the brief and finish the majority of a nine-by-thirteen-inch pan of brownies by eleven o'clock. I was just reading it over when the doorbell rang. *Shit*. Had Trent changed his mind? Who else could it be?

I looked at my reflection in the hallway mirror, swiped at the chocolate goo at the corner of my mouth, then licked my fingers. My mascara was redistributed under my eyes and scattered across my cheekbones. At least my eyes weren't puffy anymore. The bell rang twice more in quick succession. He was getting impatient. No time to change out of my sweats and *Boys Suck* T-shirt.

I licked the tail of my T-shirt and wiped under my eyes. Great, now I looked like shit *and* had two black blotches on my shirt. Before answering the door, I practiced a few looks in the mirror. Surprised. Happy. Pissed. Yes, pissed was good.

I threw open the door, and there they were, the Six Chicks, standing on my grand front porch with square wicker baskets of God knows what. "We heard about the board meeting," Miranda said as she pushed past me. The other chicks followed, each one bearing gifts of comfort food and drinks. "Took me a while to round everybody up, but we're here to save your ass."

\* \* \*

Miranda insisted they all turn off their cell phones and pitch them in the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter, so that we could concentrate on the business at hand. I filled everyone in on my very shitty day and then moved on to Trent.

"*He did not.*" Stacia poured the biggest bag Doritos makes into a salad bowl while Hannah mixed up a batch of Firefly martinis.

"He left you high and dry?" Emma hissed.

"I'm taking a class at Family Friendly Firearms in Mt. Pleasant," Hannah growled. "I say we shoot him."

"That'll teach him," Shelby added.

"You're not serious are you?" Of course, if they'd said they wanted to shoot Trent five seconds after he turned me down, I might have let them. "I don't want him dead."

"Well, at least let us wing him," Emma said. "A man who looks like that? It's even more of a crime for him to leave a girl in her hour of need. And Hannah's just the girl to do it. Unless of course you want to do it yourself, Darcy."

"No way. I'll do it. I've got my own gun now and everything," Hannah whined.

"Hush up," Miranda tasted the first martini and nodded in approval. "I'd shoot him myself if I thought it would help matters. But we've got bigger problems here than Darcy getting her itch scratched."

"Aw, come on, Miranda. Just let Hannah shoot over his head. Put the fear of God in him," Dusty drawled with a sinful grin.

"Darcy's got bigger issues than being snubbed." Miranda handed me a

drink. "You got the big-ass house, so I'm guessing you got the big-ass mortgage to go with it." I nodded. "And those bitches at the Historical Society think they can send you packing just like that. Don't they, Darcy girl?" She snapped her perfectly manicured fingers. I'd have to ask her where she gets her nails done. After she saves my ass. "Well they don't know shit."

"I thought I was being smart." Why is it that just putting your hand into a great big bowl of chips automatically makes you feel better? Just a little bit, but still. I popped a couple in my mouth. "I had the right people look over my business plan and my finances to make sure I could do this, but then..."

"Shit happens." And Dusty should know since she owns the B&B two doors down from Miranda's. "These homes are giant money-sucking black holes, but they're *our* giant money-sucking black holes."

"Damn right, and we're going to fix things, Darcy. Don't you worry," Stacia huffed. "Dusty and Miranda have been in the business for six years. Emma works for an ad agency in Charleston. Shelby and Hannah have shops in town, so they know the tourist market. And I—" Stacie stopped her impassioned speech. "Well, I can keep everybody in coffee."

"Don't you dare sell yourself short," Miranda gave Stacia the eye. "Coffee's important, girlfriend. And when you finish that psych degree, you're gonna be hell on wheels."

"Can we really do this?" I asked. "Make Mimosa House successful without the Historical Society?"

"Hell, yes we can," Stacia growled, raising her martini glass. "And from here on out, the Six Chicks will now be known as the Seven Sirens. Or the Seven Sisters. Or—"

"We'll work on a catchy name later," Miranda said. "Right now, just know we've got your back, Darcy."

\* \* \*

The Seven Sirens, or whatever we were going to call ourselves, adjourned around 2:00 a.m. Friday morning since everybody had work, except for Stacia who had class. We decided to reconvene that evening and spend the entire weekend hammering out a strategy to not only keep Mimosa House afloat, but make her a huge success.

I was ecstatic about all the girl power on the marketing front, but part of me felt bad about what had happened with Trent. While I'm not sure mind-numbing sex is ever a bad thing, he was right. I was a mess last night, and it probably wasn't such a great idea.

Never in a million years would I announce this to the sisterhood, but I decided the next time I saw him, I'd be a grownup and apologize. And when he saw that I was totally fine, maybe he'd give me a grownup reward. I still really needed to get laid.

I was stuck in morning traffic and should have been going over my argument for Judge Stanley. Instead, I practiced all the things I wanted to say to Trent in the rearview mirror. "I was wrong." Eyes downcast, demure. "I'm

sorry." Slight blush with doe eyes. "You were right, Trent. I totally wasn't ready. Not like I am now," Again, slight blush but with vixen eyes. I almost rear-ended a Bimmer trying to channel the vixen.

The only thing worse than rush hour traffic in Charleston is trying to find a parking place near the courthouse. I pulled into a garage near the stables where the tourists go for historic carriage rides around Charleston, and dodged the horse shit on my way to the courthouse. I was just getting ready to cross the street when one of the cobbled bricks caught my heel and snapped my Jimmy Choo.

Back when I was practicing law, I wouldn't have missed a beat. I'd have another pair of shoes in my bag, a more comfortable albeit less attractive walking pair, but I had nothing. So, the vixen and the doe and the Dragon Lady all rolled into me, hobbled it up the gazillion front steps of the courthouse. I went through security and limped down the hall towards the Honorable Judge John D. Stanley's office.

A secretary looked up at me and head cocked her head to the side while she tried to decide what was wrong with me. I held up my five-inch heel. "I'm a little lopsided."

"Oh, you poor dear."

I could hear some men yucking it up in the judge's office, and asked for the ladies room. She pointed down the hall. Wanting to compensate for the lack of one shoe, I fluffed up my hair and put on a little pinker lipstick that made me look less Dragon Lady and more vixen.

"Sounds like they're having a good time in there," I said to the receptionist when I returned.

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "It's that Bob Pope; he's such a stitch and a good attorney too, one of the best. By the way, while you were in the powder room, I asked the judge if he was ready for you and he said yes."

More laughter. "I'll just wait till he's finished with Mr. Pope; don't want to spoil their fun."

"Oh, honey, go on in," she smiled. "They're waiting for you."

I pushed open the door to find all kinds of bromances. The judge, who looked to be in his sixties, had on a Citadel ring as did the other two men who looked to be in their forties. The all stood politely and then took their seats.

"Judge John Stanley," he drawled, shaking my hand. "Have a seat Miss Darcy Vance, and let me introduce you to these old Citadel knobs."

"Knobs compared to you, judge," the Mr. Clean bald guy shook my hand. "Bob Pope."

The other man, was small and wiry, and looked to have the body of a runner. "Jenson Carpenter."

"Pleased to meet you." They took their chairs in front of the judge, leaving me off to the side, near the door. "Thank you for seeing me today, Judge Stanley. Dalton Prichard speaks very highly of you." A great big fat lie,

actually I had no idea what Dalton thought of this guy; he hadn't said anything except that he'd gotten me the appointment.

"Surprising." He let the word sink in. "Y'all know Baxter Prichard's boy, don't you? He lasted what? A semester at the Citadel? Transferred to Stanford." He said the last word like Stanford was a pansy-ass school. The other two nodded with knowing smirks.

"I understand you want to file an injunction against these fine gentlemen's client, Jack Mauldin." He slid on his glasses and glanced over the brief I handed him.

Okay, so these guys weren't just friends he was yucking it up with. "Yes, sir. I've outlined everything. "Normally, a situation like this wouldn't be a problem for the Dragon Lady, but apparently she had defected and was most likely sitting in a bar somewhere on East Bay Street.

It seemed really hot in there, but the guys in the three-piece suits weren't fanning themselves. A knock at the door saved me.

"We've got one more judge, looks like you're going to need a bigger office," Bob Pope quipped.

The door opened, but sitting behind the door, I couldn't tell who it was. The Judge laughed at Bob's joke and glanced up from scanning my ardent plea to grant an injunction. "Come on in, Trent."

The wind gushed out of me. "Trent?"

I looked from him to the judge. "Well, from the looks of it, there's no need for introductions. Trent, you know Bob and Jenson."

"What are you doing here?" I hissed.

"He's looking out for his daddy's best interest. But there's no need. While I'm sure you've written a fine brief, Miss Vance." And how the hell would he know, he hadn't even read it? "The fact remains that your survey was incorrect. The county has a right—up to 250 feet of a property owners' property—to build a road, and that's what they're doing. Looks like you've gone to a lot of trouble for nothing."

Meaning I had wasted *his* time, but I was still trying to get over feeling like I'd been sucker punched the moment Trent walked into the room. I pinched myself good and hard. *Regroup.* I gave Trent my best go-to-hell look. "Your honor—"

"Miss Vance, I understand you were a practicing attorney in Atlanta. Quite a good one I'm told."

"Yes, your honor, but—"

"You can imagine how surprised I was to know this was coming down the pike." He handed her papers back. "Especially with it being all cut and dried. Of course the fact that you *didn't* make sure of what you were buying before you signed on the dotted line is unfortunate, Miss Vance. Now, I understand Trent here on behalf of Mauldin Enterprises has graciously agreed to haul away the debris. Something he's not obligated to do."

Trent's face was solemn. Damn it, he *was* on his father's side, proving that



blood really is thicker than lust.

"We can have the rubble cleared away by this afternoon for you," Bob Pope said, like he was offering me a great big prize wrapped up in a bow. "Just tell the boys what you want them to do with the half of that great big gate. I've seen pictures of that sucker, it's huge."

I'd love to tell him exactly where he could put my gate.

"Bet it would fetch a good price for scrap metal," Jenson added, and they all laughed in unison. Except for Trent.

"And I understand congratulations are in order, Trent," Bob added.

"What's that now?" the judge asked. "Are you back on the tour?"

"No," Trent said like it hurt just to say the word. *Well, good.*

"Yesterday, Big Jack made Trent here interim project manager of Arcadia Dunes," Jenson chimed in, patting Trent on the back.

I'd had enough of the love fest and hobbled out of the room without the semi-groveling that usually happens in a judge's presence because I'd never have to see him again. And another thing, Dalton Prichard was still on my lifetime shit list. *Thanks for nothing, Dalton.*

I hurried to the elevator, walking like a peg legged sailor. Somewhere behind me, a door open and then I heard footsteps. It's a wonder the steam coming out of my ears didn't fog up the mirrors when I stepped into the elevator. Just before the doors closed, Trent put his hand out, stopped the door, and got in.

"*Get out.*" I hit the button to keep the doors open but he didn't budge. "You ambushed me, Trent. You showed your true colors. Now get the hell out."

"My dad fired his project manager last night and asked me to fill in. I texted and tried to call you a million times to tell you, but you didn't answer."

Of course. My phone was still in the fruit bowl at home. "You sat in that room and didn't say a word." He reached for me, but I pulled away.

"Look, I know this looks bad, but I'm in a better position to help you now."

"I don't need your kind of help." I couldn't believe I'd looked like a first year law student in that room. Even worse, I sounded like one too.

Still jammed against the button, my finger was cramping, and the elevator was doing that scary thing where it tries to close anyway. So I let go. He reached for me and I jerked away.

"Don't touch me."

"Darcy, you're wrong. I am on your side, and I'm going to fix this. I'm sorry but the judge was right back there, as it stands, there's not anything you can do to stop the road. But you bought yourself some time by filing the complaint with the appeal's board. I'll try to—"

"You heard them back there. They're bulldozing ahead with their plans for that God-awful entrance." I would not cry. I would not cry. *Oh, shit.* "And now I'll have to beg Mr. Hunsucker, who *hates* me, to share a driveway until



this settled. Maybe forever.”

“Darcy, don’t cry.” He started to push a strand of hair away from my face, but I beat him to it. “I don’t know how long it’s going to take my dad to find another project manager, but I promise you, as long as I have the job, I’ll look for another way to stop the road.”

All four walls of the elevator were mirrored, which normally would have been eye candy heaven with Trent Mauldin standing next to me. His hands were fisted at his sides like he was fighting the urge to touch me, and I was giving off the best don’t-screw-with-me vibe I could muster. But somehow, it’s a lot more effective when you’re not crying and your Jimmy Choos aren’t broken.

The elevator doors opened and I charged out into the lobby. Trent grabbed my arm and spun me around. Completely lopsided, I fell into him, glaring, trying to pull away, but he held me tight.

“Just trust me,” he said. Then he let me go.



# Chapter Eleven

Trent tried to call Darcy, but she wasn't taking his calls. He drove by her house several times and saw a bunch of cars there. He didn't think she'd already opened the inn, but it sure looked like it. He thought about knocking on her door anyway, but if she was working, if this was her first time with guests, it wouldn't exactly be a good time to talk about what happened Thursday night, much less his new position with Mauldin Enterprises.

He went out with his brothers, something they hadn't done in a long time. They hit a couple of the bars in Magnolia Bay and then cabbed it over to Awendaw to Barn Jam. Trent hadn't been there in years and had forgotten what a cool place it was for hearing live music. It wasn't anything fancy, just a shed where the band played while the crowd hung out under the canopy of hundred-and-fifty-year-old oaks. The local band, Between Girls, was actually pretty good and played a little bit of everything.

He and Dane and Logan, took bets on how long it would take Tanner to defect. With just enough of Big Jack in them, they laid down money on whether the girl or girls would be blonde, Tanner's perennial favorite, or brunette, short or tall. The big money was on under thirty minutes with a tall blonde.

The band had just finished a blistering rendition of Tom Petty's "Mary Jane's Last Dance," when Tanner sauntered off with a cute redhead, he looked back over his shoulder and gave them a shit-eater's grin, which his brothers flipped him off.

"Pay up, boys," Dane gloated.

"Double or nothing that he doesn't go home with her," Logan said.

"You're on," Dane said with a grin that made Trent and Logan wonder what he knew that they didn't.

The band continued to pay homage to Tom Petty, digging into "I Won't Back Down" when a pair of arms snaked around Trent's waist.

Hayla. She had the face of a goddess and a body meant for sin. She laid into him with a long wet kiss, and for the life of him, he didn't know why he wasn't kissing the blonde bombshell back. He and Hayla had a long, hot history that began when they were in college and continued on and off over the years. Two years ago, things had ended, for good he thought, but her kiss said different.

Hayla had worked as a research assistant, and the last time they were together, she'd done project work so she would be free to travel with him whenever the opportunity arose, which meant whenever he asked her.

She'd been his date to The Monday After The Masters, a celebrity pro-am that raises money for South Carolina charities. The event, run by the guys from Hootie and the Blowfish, was a couple of fun days of trash-talking golf and great music. He and Hayla had had such a good time, Trent had asked her to push back her next project and go with him on the next few tour stops, and she did.

Three weeks later, they were in Charlotte for the Wells Fargo Championship, having dinner at the hotel with Zach Johnson and his wife, Kim. On their way back from the pool with the Johnson's sitter, their two little kids caught sight of their parents and crashed the dinner. Before Kim sent them off with the sitter, the boys gave goodnight hugs to everyone.

With a pair of chubby little arms around Hayla's neck, she looked up at Trent to let him know she wanted the fairy tale complete with a couple of kids, and she wanted it with him. He liked her, he cared a lot about her, but he knew he didn't feel the same way she did. He decided then and there to end it, but she beat him to it. And for one of the few times in his very competitive life, that was fine by Trent.

"Hey, stranger," Hayla said.

"Hey. It's good to see you." He kissed her on the cheek and introduced her to his brothers who were falling all over themselves to get her a drink or anything else she wanted. Trent grabbed a Corona out of the cooler and borrowed two limes and a Koozie from a friendly and extremely organized partygoer who had her cooler parked beside his.

Hayla took a long draw off of the beer and swayed hypnotically to the music. "You remembered."

## Chapter Twelve

It was happy hour when the girls converged on my house Friday evening. They toted overnight bags and wicker baskets restocked with goodies and cocktails to get us through the weekend. Both Emma and Miranda had their stand-ins working for them, other B&B sitters who kept the guests happy. As it turned out, there was a whole network of B&B owners in Magnolia Bay who housesat for each other when the need arose. I didn't see myself using that perk anytime soon, but it was good to know there were other folks like Miranda and Emma who were willing to help when they could.

Dusty made homemade pizza, while everyone brainstormed, trying to find a big idea to launch Mimosa House, something unique that would garner free publicity. Every time the subject strayed to guys or shooting Trent, Miranda put them back on topic.

"Gaaaah," Shelby growled. "I'm too tired to think. Everything we've come up with so far is shit."

"Don't say that, Shelby. You all have come up with some really good ideas," I said.

"But nothing great." Emma sighed. "Nothing that's going to get you some press."

"It's such a shame," Hannah said. "This is such a great place. We haven't had this much fun in a long time."

"Oh, my God." I squealed, making half the girls do the same and the other half look around to see if there was a palmetto bug to swat. "What have I got that nobody in Magnolia Bay has?"

"Christian Louboutin shoes?" Shelby blurted out. Everyone including me looked at her like she was nuts. "Okay, so I went through Darcy's closet. It's not like I haven't been through all of your closets too."

"Miss Shelby here, is a shoe whore." Dusty laughed as Shelby swatted her. "Am I wrong? You should see her closet? Any guy who dates her for more



than a couple of weeks is going to buy her at least three pairs.”

“Are you implying that I put out for shoes?” Shelby asked.

“No.” Dusty giggled. “I’m just saying if some poor shmuck wants to enjoy your company, he’d better be prepared to pull out his Visa card and hope to God he has a big enough credit limit.”

“I see where you’re headed with this.” Miranda was positively glowing. “Twelve rooms. Going back to the heart of this place really was.”

“You’re going to turn it back into a whorehouse?” Stacia gasped.

“No.” Miranda and I said together.

“I knew this place was special the moment I walked through the front door. It didn’t have the negative energy so many of the other homes that I looked at had. And why is that?” I asked.

“Because a bunch of women lived here,” Miranda said.

“Yeah, but they were hookers,” Stacia added.

“That’s true,” I said. “But in all my research, the girls were treated very well by the madam.”

“Again. Yeah, but they were hookers,” Stacia said.

“It’s a sad statement for womankind, but they were treated better than a lot of women of their day,” I said. “And when the madam closed the brothel, she gave each one of her girls enough money to start a new life. Two of them refused to leave her side, and stayed with her until her death.”

“Brilliant.” Hannah had the same glow Miranda did. “You’re going to make this place a girlfriend getaway.”

“Exactly,” Miranda and I said together, high-fiving each other. “And maybe a romantic place for couples during the holidays. Valentine’s Day.”

“Wow,” Emma gushed. “I can sell this. Oh, my God, I can sell the hell out of this idea.”

“Now, Darcy, if you do this, I can promise you the folks here in the historical community won’t like it one bit,” Miranda said. “Present company excluded of course.”

“Nothing’s going to change the fact that they hate this place, but that doesn’t matter to me anymore. I love Mimosa House, and with or without their blessing, I want to keep her.”

“Who needs the Historical Society anyway?” said Dusty who belonged, and I doubted she was going to cancel her membership. But still, it was the thought that counted.

Shelby lined up Three-Layer Chocolate Cake shooters on the kitchen counter and we raised our glasses with yummy Frangelico, Godiva Chocolate liqueur, and Vanilla Stoli to our big idea. “To girlfriends,” Miranda said.

I raised my glass.

\* \* \*

The past thirty-six hours had been so much fun, I hadn’t give Trent any thought. Or much thought. Okay, I thought about him a lot, and somehow still managed to stay focused on the task of saving Mimosa House.

After a marathon brainstorming session, I awoke Saturday morning before the rest of the girls. All of them had taken their pick of the bedrooms and everyone but Emma had said they wanted to sleep late. I took my coffee out onto the huge veranda that overlooked the bay and the beautiful marsh. This was my paradise. Dolphins played around boats moored in the harbor. A pair of herons, who may or may not have been dating, skittered around the point where the bay met the marsh. And my beautiful marsh that would soon be man-mangled. Gone.

In the distance, I saw two people tramping toward the edge of the marsh, holding hands like the footing was iffy. Although I'd never ventured out into the muck, I decided I should before it was gone. Take some pictures, maybe have some nice giclees made to hang in the some of the bedrooms.

The couple came into view, a guy and a blonde woman. She was on her phone, nodding. When she ended the call, she said something to him. He picked her up and swung her around. The woman squealed, and when she slid down his body, she stopped, still wrapped around him. He looked toward my house, but I don't think he saw me. Even from some distance, I knew it was Trent.

My stainless steel coffee mug clunked as it hit the veranda. I couldn't breathe. It wasn't the same as walking in on Dalton. After all Trent's fervent promises, it felt worse.

They got into to an SUV and drove away.

Well, guess there was a reason when Trent turned me down, a very blonde reason. *Men*. Did I really need a man? Did I really want one? The problem was I did want one—only one—and he'd just left with another woman.

I sat there until I didn't feel like I'd just been kicked in the gut. Through everything, law school, my practice, the fiasco with Dalton, even the mess with my house, I'd always gotten up off of the mat. But watching Trent drive away was my last-straw moment.

But here's the thing I *didn't* know until I met those crazy Six Chicks. If I couldn't or wouldn't get up, I knew they'd make sure I did. I'd never had that, and as much as my love life sucked, I had six new best friends to be grateful for. Six fierce and loving women in my home, and I wasn't about to dishonor them by throwing myself another pity party. Instead, I got busy in the kitchen whipping up a killer brunch.

I was surprised when a gorgeous coffee-seeking man came into my kitchen. He was dressed in a well-worn pair of jeans and a smile. "Hey. You must be Darcy. I'm Morgan."

"Nice to meet you. Coffee?"

"Yes. Emma kept me up." I laughed. "Not what you think, although I'm working on that." He smirked. "She called me to brainstorm last night, and I invited myself over. We put together a killer marketing plan for you."

"Really?"

"This place is really great, Darcy. When we're done, you'll be so booked,

you'll be turning away guests."

Emma padded into the kitchen dressed in a University of South Carolina T-shirt, presumably Morgan's, and clutching her laptop. She said good morning and gratefully took the cup of coffee I poured her. "Hi," she said to Morgan with a breathy little sigh. Yep, she was as much a goner as he was.

"Morgan tell you?"

"He said you worked through the night on a plan. Honestly, Emma, I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you and the rest of the girls."

"Well, we couldn't very well let you leave Magnolia Bay. You're one of us now."

"How about me? Can I join up?" Morgan put his arm around her.

"Sorry. Girls only," Emma laughed, flipping her laptop open.

She went through an impressive marketing plan that utilized every contact and resource she had through the advertising agency she and Morgan worked for. All of it for free. On top off all of the publicity Emma had planned, everyone would pitch in their support. Stacia would put posters and flyers in the coffee shop for Mimosa House, which was being tagged as The Great Girlfriend Getaway. Morgan had gone into Miranda's and Dusty's websites and put a link to Mimosa House so that if they were booked, I could get the spillover. And Shelby and Hannah would put flyers and posters in their retail stores offering guests a twenty-five percent discount on their purchases when they booked a stay or were a guest at Mimosa House.

"Emma and I think you should kick off everything with a free event," Morgan said.

"You mean like an open house?"

"Bigger," he said. "June is ALS awareness month. There's a support group of women here in the Charleston area. They all have loved ones dealing with Lou Gehrig's disease. There's about twenty women in the group. Bring as many as can come. Put the spillover into the other B&Bs in town if Dusty and Miranda don't have the space. Really make the weekend special for them. It'll cost you some money, but it's a great cause that will get you great local and maybe even national press."

"Another one of Morgan's brilliant ideas is to co-promote with The Sassy Scissors and Cloud Nine, the new spa on Main Street. You can offer guests makeovers, spa days, shopping junkets into Charleston. Honestly, Darcy, the possibilities are endless."

"I'll need to make some changes to your website to tie everything in, but all of this can go live today, if you want. And with Emma's media connections, the reservations should start pouring in."

"Fueled by your brilliance," Emma said.

"I think she just wants me for my brain," he teased.

I laughed when Emma blushed hard. Nope. That wasn't why she wanted him. As grateful as I was to them, it was hard to see the two of them so into each other and not think about Trent and that woman. I swiped at my eyes

that stung from the memory and the incredible generosity of my friends.

“Oh, you hate it,” Emma said.

What was wrong with me? Could I be any more ungrateful? “No. I absolutely love it; it’s perfect, I’m just floored with everything you’ve done for me. I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

Emma threw her arms around me. “I can’t wait for the girls to see the plan.”

I hugged her back for all I was worth and then got busy whipping up the best brunch ever.

\* \* \*

It had been two weeks and Darcy still wouldn’t return Trent’s texts or phone calls, and he wasn’t about to go banging on her door. Again. If she didn’t want to see him. Fine. He’d get over her. He glanced at his phone to see if there was anything from her.

Oh, hell. Who was he kidding? He’d worked his ass off every day so that he’d be too tired to think about her, but that was all he seemed to be able to do. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her in that damn elevator, or worse, in her bedroom when he’d turned her down. That was the look that haunted him the most, that made him want to kick himself for being stupid enough to say no to her. But what if he had slept with her? Would he be any better off than he was now? Probably. Not. He’d want her even more.

His father had laughed when she’d defiantly replanted her landscaping where it had originally been, but damn good for her. She was stubborn to a fault and had gotten the fight back in her and wasn’t about to back down. Not so good for Trent.

He was happy for her though. The house looked great, and with the rubble hauled away, Darcy was still able to use her driveway until the matter was settled with the Appeals Board next week.

The fanfare from her new marketing campaign had been overshadowed by the opening of Arcadia Dunes Sales Office. But, instead of completely stealing Darcy’s spotlight, it probably helped that the media was crawling all over Magnolia Bay, looking for stories. And the story about the ALS support group had gotten her a lot of good press.

He glanced at his phone again. Still no word from Darcy. Or Hayla. It’d been nice talking to her lately. She didn’t have to do the things she was doing for him, he knew that, and he was grateful.

His phone rang. Hayla. “Hey,” Trent said.

“Hey, yourself. Want to meet me for a drink?”

“Sure. Where?”

“I’m headed your way. Meet me at Bottoms Up in thirty minutes.”

“Thanks. See you there.”

He ended the call and rifled through his suitcase on the closet floor that looked like it had exploded. Golfers were usually particular about their clothes, Trent had always been. Right now, his suitcase was as much of a



mess as he was, but it wouldn't be for long.

Tanner had sold the house and was closing in a month, and where would that leave Trent? Would he leave Magnolia Bay? Would he stay? He pulled on a T-shirt and ran his hands through his hair. Great. It was the one he was wearing the morning Darcy battled his father's company. He'd washed it since then, something he regretted. He smelled it, trying to remember her scent, smiling at how feisty she'd been, even incredibly hung over.

He glanced at the clock on the dresser. Time to go see Hayla.

\* \* \*

"Darcy? We've got you on speakerphone," Miranda said. "We debated on calling. Sorry if we're interrupting."

"Don't be. I just dropped the ALS group off at Crusoe's for dinner. They're having a blast, and I am too." I poured myself a glass of wine. "They begged me to stay, but thanks to you guys, I have a ton of inquiries to answer. Honestly, if I can book a fraction of them, I'll be full the rest of the year."

"I'm glad," Shelby drawled, "But that wasn't why we debated calling. We're at Bottoms Up."

"Trent's here," Stacia added.

"With some blonde bitch," Dusty said.

I didn't have anyone to blame but myself. I hadn't returned his texts or phone calls. What was there to say?

"Hannah's ready to shoot him," Stacia hissed.

My heart clenched at the idea of my friends loving me through this, this—I wasn't sure what it was. A break up? Did Trent and I ever really get started? What do you call the kind of connection he and I had when it suddenly ends?

"It's okay, Stacia." Whatever it was, it was over.

"You need us?" Miranda asked. "Quick as we can get our tab closed out, we can be there."

"No, I'm fine, got my glass of wine, curling up with a good book. Y'all go on and have fun." I laughed at how southern I sounded. The girls were rubbing off on me in the best possible way.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, one of the women in the ALS group called to say they'd left Crusoe's and were going to hit the bar on Main Street I'd told them about. The Washboard Wenches always packed them in there every Wednesday night, an equal mix of both locals and tourists. Everyone came to see a seventy-something-year-old girl group. Aside from being really talented singers, they single handedly kept drinking songs like "Give Me a Red Hot Mama and an Ice Cold Beer" and "Barnacle Bill the Sailor" alive.

"You'll love the Wenches," I told her. "Have fun."

"It's such a nice night, we'll just walk back to the inn. So don't wait up," she quipped. "And Darcy? Thank you so much; we're having the time of our lives."

\* \* \*



In the living room, I fired up my Kindle, determined to finish *The Good Wife*, the last book in the Brennan Sisters trilogy. I'd started it a few days ago, and while it was a great book, I was fairly sure the hero was cheating on the heroine.

Seeing Trent in the marsh with that woman and then the conference call with the Six Chicks confirming that he was with the blonde, made the book even harder to read. I'd just grabbed my phone to call the Chicks and take them up on their offer to come over when my doorbell rang.

I threw open the door to find Stacia, Miranda, Dusty, Emma, Shelby, and Hannah armed with food and wine.

"You are not alone, girlfriend," Shelby marched past me toward the kitchen.

"We stick together," Emma followed.

"The She Woman Man Haters Club is now in session," Emma crowed. *Yeah, right.* I remembered the way she had looked at Morgan.

"The honorable Miranda Durrier Hamilton presiding," Miranda said, and gave me a peck on the cheek.

"Yeah," Stacia, crowed.

"Hell, yeah," Hannah echoed.

\* \* \*

Two bottles of wine later, our conversation had gone from militant to dark, searching for answers to hard questions that have puzzled women since the dawn of time. Why are men stupid? Why can't they be satisfied with one woman? Why can't men *be* more like women?

While I appreciated the Chicks support, I knew it was killing Stacia not to check her phone that kept pinging because she'd gotten a text and it was most likely from Sawyer.

There was a knock, then the door opened and twelve very tipsy ladies joined our party, wearing *We're Living to Kick ALS's Ass* T-shirts. All of these women had loved ones battling the horrible disease. They were in the fight of their lives because they loved their husbands, their partners so much, they would never let them bear the pain of their disease alone.

Emma threw back her wine and sat back on the couch, tucking her legs under her. "I'm not even sure I believe in love."

"Oh, it's real," a chubby blonde woman who looked to be in her forties said. "But sometimes love sucks."

Miranda and I went to the kitchen and returned with more glasses and more wine. We started doling out drinks to those who wanted them. A few of the women excused themselves and headed upstairs, which I hated. This was supposed to be a fun weekend for them, and the Chicks and I were turning it into a downer.

"We're not talking about the kind of love you all have," Hanna said. "We talking about Darcy's guy. Or the guy she loves but won't admit it. He was with another woman tonight."

The ALS women gasped. A few of them swore. "Trust me, honey," an old redhead, who could be me in about fifty years, said. "They aren't all alike."

"Yes, they are," one of the ALS women said. "They lie and cheat and then they get sick. I used to be so angry at him for catting around, but now I think that's just the way he's built."

"Don't you let your man off that easy," Miranda said. "I don't know how in the hell we got off on love. The real issue is—"

"Trent."

When I said his name, everybody looked at me and then followed my gaze to the archway that lead to the kitchen. Fourteen pairs of eyes narrowed at him.

"I knocked on the front door, but I guess you didn't hear me. The kitchen door was open, so—I've been standing here for a while," he said. So he'd gotten an earful of what women think. Good. Maybe it would serve him well in his next relationship.

"I was just going to leave this for you, Darcy, but I couldn't leave." He stood there dressed in ancient jeans that hugged his body perfectly and a T-shirt; he was holding an envelope. His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "God, it's good to see you."

The chubby blonde was right. Love does suck. "Yeah. You too." I glanced around to see if he'd brought his date along.

"Can we talk somewhere?" He tried to smile again. "Alone?"

"Don't do it, Darcy," Stacia hissed.

"Yeah, don't do it, Darcy." Shelby was giving him the death stare. "We saw you with *her*."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"That pretty little blonde you were with five minutes ago at Bottoms Up," Hannah gritted out. "I should shoot you where you stand, but it'd ruin Darcy's good rug."

Trent held his palms up in surrender. "Ladies, I don't know what you thought you saw at the bar, but you're wrong." He laid the envelope down on the coffee table slowly, like he'd been told to surrender his weapon, "Darcy. Please. Just five minutes. Alone."

"Steady now, Darcy girl," Emma said. She was on one side of me and Shelby was on the other, emanating strength.

"I saw you with her, Trent." He'd obviously seen the Chicks at the bar, not me, but I *had* seen him in the marsh with that woman. He looked puzzled and beautiful. Yes, alone with Trent Mauldin was a very bad idea, I didn't trust myself with him right now. Maybe never. "Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of my friends."

"Okay. If that's the way it has to be." He was quiet for a beat. "Darcy, I can't stand here in front of your friends and tell you I'm in love with you." Everyone sucked in a breath, except me.

"Not the smoothest talker," Shelby whispered.

My heart was beating a million miles an hour begging me to *trust him* like he'd asked that day at the courthouse, but I couldn't.

He raked his hands through his gorgeous hair. "God, I suck at this." Half of the room openly agreed with him. The other half was already smitten. "Okay. Here's the thing. I can't stop thinking about you. I want you all the time, but not how you think," he added quickly, which drew another gasp from the girls.

"He's a train wreck," Shelby said.

He was so far out of his element, I almost felt sorry for him, but I couldn't afford to feel sorry for him.

"I want to talk. I miss talking to you, Darcy, because when I hear your voice, when I'm with you, *that's* the best part of my day. I want to be here with you because you love this house so much, because it's your dream. I want you in every possible way. Maybe that's love, I wish I knew enough about love to be able to say for sure, I don't, but I want a shot to find out, Darcy. I'm asking you to give me a chance."

My face was bathed in tears.

"Yeah? Well who was the blonde?" Miranda growled.

"A friend who did a favor for me," Trent answered, his eyes locked on mine. "It's all there in the report," he nodded toward the envelope.

Miranda jerked up the envelope and handed it to me. I couldn't read it. I pushed it back in her direction and gave her a nod. Her long perfectly manicured finger slid along the opening. She pulled out several pages, read the first one and rifled through the rest.

"Everything you need to go back to the judge is there," he said. "He'll grant a permanent injunction against the entrance, he won't have a choice."

"Casanova's report here claims there's a pair of love birds in your part of the marsh—wood storks. They're on the state and national Endangered Species Lists, so he's right, the judge won't have a choice," Miranda said to me. "And the blonde did this for you?"

He nodded, eyes on mine, begging me to let him in.

"You scare me," I whispered.

He shook his head and laughed. "Yeah, I thought you scared me too, but I was wrong. Being without you? *That* scares the hell out of me, Darcy."

I don't remember getting off the couch or throwing myself in his arms, but there I was laughing, crying. Trent kissed me and the little piece of my heart that he'd taken from the start was filled in with a little piece of his.



# Chapter Thirteen

Well, let's just say I'd crossed getting laid off of my list over six months ago.

With a houseful of guests all the time, Trent and I had fun finding creative places to shag, and I don't mean the state dance of South Carolina. The cave was a given for mind-blowing sex and sleeping, which is highly overrated when you have a sex god in your bed. The laundry room, the gardening shed, the Madeira closet also came in handy. The pantry was a particular favorite. The most daring place, the dining room table at three o'clock in the morning, which seemed like a really good idea until one of the guests wandered downstairs for a late-night snack.

But there I was, pinned against the same spot of the pantry wall, surrounded by the delicious scents of vanilla and cinnamon and Trent. He had taken me so many times in that same spot, my cheek marks were on the wall, which I'd added to his honey-do list.

"I love you," he breathed against my neck.

Hearing those three little words from Trent Mauldin's lips, never got old. It was the first thing he said to me every morning and the last thing he said before we went to sleep, and there were more I-love-yous in between those times than I could count.

"I love you too, but you're still painting this wall. Today."

"It's your imagination. There are no marks." Still inside me, he pulled me away from the wall just enough to see. "Well, maybe just a little" he laughed. "But I like it."

"Sometimes guests come in the pantry, Trent, and it's obvious whose cheek marks those are."

"Are you saying you want me up against the wall from now on?" He trailed kisses along my jaw line to my ear. "I could go for that." And with one swift move, we traded places.



"What I'm saying..." It was impossible not to kiss this man back. "...is we have a houseful of women I have to make breakfast for." I gathered up all my willpower and pushed off him. "And you have things to do."

He smiled that crooked grin that always made me weak-kneed. "I know, paint the pantry." It was always a joy and a disappointment to see Trent slide his jeans up over that perfect ass and pull his t-shirt on. "Build your house."

For the last four months, Trent had been working on turning the old carriage house into a home so we could get out of the cave, enjoy the incredible views of the bay and the marsh. And have some privacy.

"Yes. Go build me a house." I kissed him again, adjusted my skirt and buttoned my blouse. When I opened the pantry door, eight women were gathered around the island, drinking coffee, their eyes glued to the pantry. And their ears, I am sure. This time, because it wasn't the first time Trent and I had been caught shagging in the pantry, I didn't blush so hard.

"Good morning," I chirped and got busy making breakfast and chatting the women up while they ogled my man.

"Morning, ladies." Trent gave me a kiss and headed out back with that tool belt that was such an aphrodisiac.

Thanks to the feature Emma got in *Southern Living* magazine, Mimosa House was packed all the time, sometimes with couples, but mostly women who came for the now legendary girlfriend get-togethers. Of course, some of the women got a little rowdy sometimes, which was a lot of fun until poor Trent wandered out of the cave alone. I'd had to rescue him on more than one occasion, and he'd promptly rewarded me in the best possible way.

God, we were happy. So freaking happy, but how long could a world-class athlete be happy in a little town like Magnolia Bay? Especially when he's not a world-class athlete anymore? Did miss the spotlight? What would happen when he finished our home? How long before he got tired of Magnolia Bay? Of me? I was terrified to ask these questions because Trent is the kind of guy who would answer them honestly, and I wanted the fairy tale we were living as long possible.

Before we went to sleep last night, he'd said our home would be finished soon. The words sent euphoria and terror zinging through my body bouncing off the walls like a pinball machine. I didn't realize I'd stiffened like a two-by-four until he pulled me closer and my body didn't melt into his.

He kissed the top of my head. "What's wrong, babe?"

"What do you think you'll do when you're done with the house, Trent?" My voice sounded timid and small, I was terrified and so very glad it was dark and he couldn't see my face.

"I'm going to live in it. With you."

Yeah, but for how long?

\* \* \*

Trent had wanted to knock out the wall in the carriage house that faced the ocean and make it all glass. After the Historical Society had kittens at the very

idea, they denied his proposal and made sure he followed their guidelines. He had the exterior painted the same cream color as Mimosa House and had a new roof put on. Before he started the interior, we walked through the place a million times until he was sure of what I wanted. We picked out everything for the interior together, and then he and a small crew went to work.

Trent had taken a page out of his dad's playbook and had papered over the windows; he kept the place locked up and the key hidden. He made me promise I'd wait until he was finished, but I was dying to see what he had done. When he wasn't around, I'd looked for the key. The times he caught me trying to peek through the tiny cracks between the paper and the windows, I was spanked, which of course just made me do it again and then we'd ended up in the cave. Or the pantry.

It was just after six p.m., all of the guests had boarded a bus, headed for the Saturday pub and gallery crawl in Charleston. The inn was empty. It had been one of those days that I was non-stop busy, but I couldn't tell you one thing I'd done if you held a gun to my head. Trent had only come up to the inn for lunch and went right back to work.

I'd just opened a bottle of wine and was trying to figure out what to make for dinner when I saw the crew come out of the carriage house. Trent hurried out after them, but didn't lock the door behind him like he usually did.

The sound of the kitchen door opening kicked my heart rate into overdrive. I was grinning so hard, my face hurt. Snaking one arm around my waist, Trent nuzzled my neck.

"Are you starting something mister?" I arched into him. Heart beating ninety miles an hour. "Because I was just starting dinner."

I could feel him smiling against my neck. "I'm meeting Tanner and Logan at Bottoms Up for a beer. I'll grab something to eat there."

"Okay." I tried not sound disappointed. Or whiny.

"Are you good with that?"

"Sure. Why?"

He turned me around to face him. "It's just last night, you seemed worried. About us."

"I love you. I love us." And I'd never been more sure of anything in my life.

"So we're good then?" I kissed him like it was our last kiss ever, and when we came up for air, I saw love and heat and maybe a little fear in his emerald green eyes. "I love you, Darcy."

The second his truck pulled out of the driveway, I whipped my apron off and headed across the lawn that was at least forty miles long, giving me too much time to think about what I was doing. This was wrong. Trent had been so excited about surprising me when the house was ready. I'd promised him a million times I'd wait until he was finished. But this was like someone going Christmas shopping and leaving the bags out in plain view. It was wrong to break my promise to Trent, but downright impossible not to look.

I pushed open the heavy double doors that opened into a small foyer and was immediately assaulted by the smell of cut wood and freshly painted walls. My feet were glued to the floor. I shouldn't. I'd promised. But I couldn't help myself.

The crisp white bead board walls of the stairs that led to my new home were lined with framed black and white pictures we'd taken on one of our many kayak trips to the Boneyard. Before I knew it, I was half way up the stairs. I patted myself on the back for stopping, but that lasted only five seconds before I sprinted the rest of the way.

What I saw laid into me like a sucker punch. How was I going to pretend I hadn't seen what I'd seen? Would Trent be angry at me for blowing the surprise? It wasn't the sky blue walls or white open beamed vaulted ceiling that took my breath away. It wasn't the perfect kitchen or the dining table he must have distracted me from seeing it delivered.

It was the words. Painted across the brown paper covering the windows that overlooked the bay. Huge letters. Crooked. Obviously painted with a roller.

*Will you marry me?*

"You promised you'd wait until the house is finished."

I spun around to see Trent standing at the top of the stairs.

"I'm sorry, I—you said you were getting a beer with your brothers, and—" I blushed hard, heart in overdrive, eyes downcast, then raking over him. There was the outline of a little square box in his front pocket. "Is that a ring in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

He took me in his arms and pulled my hips into his. "Both."

"You weren't meeting your brothers, were you? You knew I'd come up here."

He laughed and kissed me. "I knew it was killing you. I felt sorry for you."

"So you entrapped me?" I smiled against his lips. "And this is, what? A pity proposal?"

"Are you going to cross examine me, counselor, or are you going to marry me?"

He kissed away any worry I'd ever had about us, then slipped the ring on my finger. "Yes."

Trent was my forever. "Yes."

THE END

## About the Author



**Kim Boykin** is a women's fiction author with a sassy Southern streak. She is the author of *The Wisdom of Hair*, *Steal Me*, *Cowboy*, and *Palmetto Moon* (Summer 2014.) While her heart is always in South Carolina, she lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her husband, 3 dogs, and 126 rose bushes. For more on Kim's books, visit her website at <http://kimboykin.com>





# The Perfect Score

*a southern born romance*

Beth Albright

# Dedication

For my dear, sweet friend, Jane Porter. You have been a blessing to me. Your warmth and genuine friendship have become my treasure. Thank you for including me in your circle and wrapping your arms around me. I am so proud to be part of your Southern Born Books! The stars must have been aligned perfectly the day I met you—how lucky I am for this and to know you. Thank you for everything.

As always, for my precious family—my son Brooks, my husband Ted, and my mother Betty—you all are my universe.

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I have so many others I love and want to thank I could write an entire book just filled with people I love and appreciate. I am so lucky for that! As always, thank you with all my heart for the unconditional love and support of my hometown of Tuscaloosa Alabama.

As always, I hope I make y'all proud.

# Chapter One

“I’ll have another,” I said as I ordered my second dirty martini. The Sand Box was a dingy little bar near the pier in Cottonwood Cove, Alabama.

Covered in fishing ropes and other remnants of the life on the lake, the place was a dive for the small-town folk who lived here, and for the kids who were lake rats during the summer. But summer had ended weeks ago, the kids back at school, and we were well into September now. Late that night, the place was nearly empty.

I sat there nursing my drink, drowning myself in what I had come to believe was the most embarrassing moment of my career. The dim lights swung in old metal fixtures from the ceiling of the Sand Box. A jukebox playing Hank Williams Jr. stood missing some of its colored lights in the corner. A few old wooden tables were scattered around with a couple of red vinyl booths shoved in the corner near the pool table and dartboard.

I had come home, tail tucked neatly between my legs, to lick my wounds. My name is Virginia Bruce Hunnicutt. I go by Ginny. My sisters and I all have my mom’s maiden name as our middle name. I kept it as my last name for my TV job. *Ginny Bruce, reporting.* I was a reporter for CNN in Atlanta. *Was* being the key word here. I had been fired two weeks prior because one of my sources was a fake. I swear I checked the credentials but the story turned out to be full of inaccuracies and CNN is now in a lawsuit. I may never work in the media again. And CNN was my dream job.

My name is now as muddy as the Alabama red dirt, which is exactly where I ran home to: Cottonwood Cove, Alabama. It’s the safest place to be. And even though I had become quite the big-city girl, the one I had always dreamed of being, somehow, the safety of being home in Cottonwood Cove had its perks. Like being in this dive bar in the middle of the week late at night, with only one other soul in here besides me. Oh, God—and he was making his way over to me just as I was finishing my second round.



"What's your poison?" he asked in his deep sexy baritone. He was beautiful. Rugged and sculpted with dark wavy hair and gorgeous lips; he was about six foot three and deliciously well built. His dark blue eyes undressed me as he moved closer to me—or maybe that was just me thinking I'd be more comfortable with my clothes off with this gorgeous man. He was dressed in a navy Polo button-down and perfect-fitting blue jeans. His large muscular thighs and broad defined shoulders were evident even under his clothes. One dimple accentuated the right side his cute, boyish face. He smiled at me like he was fixin' to eat me up, and oh, I was feeling like dessert as he slid in next to me at the bar. He looked like an athlete. Or a god. Come to think of it, in Alabama, those are one and the same. Regardless, he was heaven to look at, or maybe I was seeing him through double martini glasses. Probably the latter since I only weighed about 125 pounds and I knew better than to have more than two drinks. Ever.

"I'm having dirty martinis," I answered. "You?"

"I'll have the same," he said to the bartender, a cute blonde-haired dude with the dimples of a twelve-year-old.

"What brings a girl like you in here this late?" he asked in his addictive sexy baritone.

"Just needed a drink," I said, trying not to give into his gorgeous cornflower blue eyes. He scooched closer. And what did he mean by *a girl like me?*

"I know what you mean. I could use one or four myself," he grinned. He was friendly and seemed genuine. He smelled of Aramis aftershave and Prell shampoo, like he had showered to meet someone here. But maybe he had been stood up.

"Meeting someone?" I asked and smiled as I stirred with my olive-laden toothpick.

"Oh, uhm, no," he stumbled. "Just needed to get out."

"Yeah, me too." The bartender delivered the drinks, setting them down on sandy-colored napkins. This was my third, and I knew I'd quit counting after this one. I felt relaxed and easy—I had needed this for the entire two weeks I'd been home. Just to get out alone and wallow in my own self-pity for a night. I needed to wallow in private, as my Mama hated self-pity. She was a pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kinda woman, so I drove to the little dive bar to get some alone time. Then Mr. Baritone and his swagger sauntered over, and my walls quickly fell as the alcohol slipped down my throat.

I needed to talk. I knew that, but finding anyone here to understand my big dreams of leaving Cottonwood Cove was difficult at best. No one could understand ever wanting to leave here. Let alone understand the huge epic failure of being released from CNN. Not even Mama.

"Are you meeting anyone?" he asked

"No, just you, it looks like to me," I said, smiling at him.

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“Live here?”

“Well, I do now. I did live in Atlanta but I left two weeks ago.”

“Oh, I’m kinda new here too,” he said.

“Oh, what do you do?” Ever the reporter, even half drunk, I had questions.

“You first—why did you leave the big city? I mean you look sophisticated enough to be in a place like Atlanta.”

He sipped his drink, taking the toothpick with two olives; wrapped his lips around one and sucked it into his mouth. I watched him do that while trying to think of an answer to his questions about me leaving Atlanta. But his lips had me thinking about something else entirely. Should I tell my awful story to a perfect stranger? Maybe a perfect stranger is exactly who I need to talk to. Before I knew it, I was spilling my entire biography...the martinis blurring my better judgment. I had told him the whole story by the time I was on my next drink, the talking flowing like the alcohol.

“So anyway, they finally had to let me go—fire me I guess is the reality of it. Anyway, I’ve been thinking that maybe I just need to either quit or hurry and get back out there. Maybe I was never really cut out to expose people. Maybe I was never really cut out to even be a reporter.”

“Oh, I’m sure you were a great investigative journalist. Don’t give up on your dreams, baby. They’re what get us out of bed in the morning. The only way dreams fail is if you quit.”

“And who are you to say? Are you some sorta mo-vi-ta-ional speaker? I mean moti-vasi-vinal? Well, you know what I’m trying to say.” I was stumbling like the great reporter I was. Too many drinks, but it was too late now.

“No, just a coach. I seem to be able to handle these little drinks a bit better than you—why don’t you let me drive you home?”

“No, I mean I don’t even know you or anything. I’ll be fine.”

He smiled at me and leaned his head over, touching my forehead with his. Before I knew it, I felt myself kiss those delicious lips, softly, slowly. The feel of his skin shot a bolt of heat through me, his sheer large presence making me nervous and excited. I didn’t know this man. He could be a murderer—my mind was dizzy with his smile and smell, his eyes and that one rogue dimple that kept appearing with every laugh we had shared. Well, dizzy with all that and the alcohol. My head started to hurt.

“Oh, my God, I am so sorry—I don’t have any idea what I’m doing,” I managed after the surprise kiss. But oh my, his lips—

“It’s no problem. I think I need to make sure you get home okay. You don’t need to be driving and well, you surely can’t walk home. Besides, I ordered you the last two drinks you had so I’m sorta responsible.”

“Okay,” I agreed, knowing somewhere in all my teachings from Mama, surely she must’ve said never to get into a car with a stranger. But somehow, that “stranger danger” lesson slipped out of my head on this hot sultry night

## Beth Albright

on the last day of summer in Alabama. I never thought licking my wounds  
would lead me to licking a stranger—but it was sure good medicine tonight

## Chapter Two

“Come on, now. Up and at ‘em, Miss Priss. Time to get yourself back out in the world.”

My very round, very loud mother, Honey Bruce Hunnicutt, yanked the yellow comforter off my snuggled, warm body, trying to push me back out there. Out there, where I had just been hurt, embarrassed, and humiliated was the very exact place I had no intention of going. I yanked the covers right back over me and buried my head into my soft pillows. The sunlight of early fall crept inside and streamed in through the window and danced across the cotton butter-yellow covers. It was still warm outside, the season change nudging each day closer to earlier sunsets and crisp cool evenings. I wanted no part of it this year.

Like any southern girl in a crisis, we all run home to our mama. And I was no different. Honey Bruce Hunnicutt was the reason. She had a heart of gold for anybody who needed her. Her real name was Henrietta, but I never heard anyone ever call her that. She had been called Honey since she was a baby. And when she married my daddy, Dirk Hunnicutt, it seemed the perfect fit.

“I’m not takin’ no for an answer. Now get outta this bed. I gotta job for you today at the paper,” Mama ordered and yanked the covers off of me again like a magician clearing a table. This time they all fell to the floor in a heap. I lay there exposed; my shorty pink pajamas bunched up my thighs, my long red hair flopping over my face.

“Mama, please. Just leave me alone. I have zero interest in your newspaper. I was at CNN for God’s sake. Now come on, you know I can’t really be a reporter for The Chatterbox. That would be the most embarrassing thing ever!”

“Right. I guess more embarrassing than being fired from one of the largest news companies in the whole wide world!” She plopped down on the bed next to me, her ample rear-end nearly squashing my hand.

"Okay, Mama, okay. I got it. But I'm not ready yet. I don't want anyone in town to see me." I pulled the pillow over my head to muffle her loudness.

"You think everybody don't already know you're hidin' out here? The more you don't come out of this house, the more guilty and shameful you look. Almost as shameful as you looked crawling in after midnight last night." She raised her eyebrows to me. "Now get your butt outta bed. I ain't a puttin' up with no more whinin'. You're a Hunnicutt, and your crazy daddy is probably turnin' over in his grave with you acting so pompous and full of yourself. You know how I don't like pompous." She lightly slapped my ass. "Now come on. I got some grits and bacon on the table. We got a busy day."

I lay there in my comfy bed and visions of that gorgeous man from last night caused my heart to race before I was barely awake. The sexual chemistry was like something I had never felt before—even though I had been under the influence of too many martinis. His huge hands had touched my thigh as we drove home, his blue eyes had gazed at me full of hunger. He was just delicious. Even though I had had too much to drink, I could still feel his soft warm lips on mine. I slowly brushed my finger across my top lip thinking of him. I had been so stupid in my haze of booze that I hadn't even gotten his name and didn't know where I could find him. I took a deep breath and a smile crept across my face. I knew I *had* to find him. I had to see him again. I remembered he drove a vintage car. A dark color I think. And he was new in town. I'm a reporter—I mean this is a small town. How hard could it be to find him? Filled with a heated excitement, I flung the covers off and slid out of bed.

\* \* \*

Cottonwood Cove was a sleepy little southern town just south of Birmingham and north of Tuscaloosa on gorgeous sparkling Lake Cottonwood. I had lived here most of my life until I went off to a small liberal arts school in North Alabama. The folks who lived in "The Cove," as everybody called it, had been there for generations. Most of them came from plenty of money, too. Not many ever left. And very few moved here if they didn't have family connections here.

Mama was part of the elite clan of the Bruce sisters of Cottonwood Cove. Better known as the Bruce Babes. That little sorority consisted of my four aunts. But Mama was different. She never quite fit into the hoity-toity attitudes, and so no one was surprised when she had married my daddy. He was from the wrong side of the tracks out in the tiny redneck town of Oakville. Mama actually fit in with those folks so much better, she became half redneck herself. Even her speech was a little more countrified than her sisters.

Mama got up and waddled through the doorway and across the hall to the kitchen. She was wearing her blue-jean shorts and a white V-neck t-shirt. She had short graying hair and a huge bosom. And while she looked a little more country than I even remembered to my newly cultured Atlanta eye, she did



## The Perfect Score

love her make-up and red lipstick. That was just the southern woman in her.

Mama ran the little weekly newspaper called *The Chatterbox*. It was a gossip rag at best but it was also a mainstay of Cottonwood Cove. It had been in our family for several generations—never making much money. But the people in town loved it. It was a place where they could check the obits, the weddings, and look for pictures of their friends.

She was the editor, the chief operating officer, and well, the chief of everything. She had a little office on Main Street near all the businesses in downtown Cottonwood Cove. It had been there since I was a baby. The little newspaper also had lists of school lunches, who's moving in and out of town, who's getting married—and divorced. It came out on Saturday mornings. More than anything it was a tradition for Cottonwood Cove.

*What in the world could Mama Honey have in mind for me?* I wondered as I stumbled into the kitchen and sat down at the old red laminate table. The chrome sides were still in good condition. This table had belonged to my great-grandmother, Josie Hunnicutt. It was a hand-me-down wedding gift to Mama when she married my daddy.

Mama had bread toasting in the old silver toaster, and the aroma of fresh frying bacon was a comfort. I knew I needed *some* kind of comfort before I received the dreaded reporting assignment.

Mama was right about one thing though; at some point I had to face my life and just get out there. I had been hiding in the house, not even going out shopping, one of my very favorite sports, for the entire two weeks I had been home.

"You've barely eaten a bite the whole time you've been home." Mama wagged a spatula at me. "If you just lay around in bed and feel sorry for yourself, you'll get too skinny."

Honey moved around the kitchen like a commander in mission control. All burners on the stove were going at once and the toaster was full. Honey always cooked a big breakfast. I grew up this way. Even on cold winter mornings when we were all trying to get out the door to school, she made us sit down and eat. I knew later in life how lucky I was to go to school on a full stomach of warm sausage and grits, eggs and toast. I also knew they didn't make many like Honey anymore.

My chair screeched on the old linoleum floor as I slid it under the table. She hadn't had the place remodeled—ever. She said she wanted Daddy to be able to recognize it if he ever came back, even though she knew he was dead. We buried him together six years ago on a rain-swept day in early spring. I knew she missed him. She missed him every day, even though they'd divorced years before he died. Somehow he'd remained her best friend till the end. She just couldn't take all his gambling. He and my rich uncle, Big Hank, Aunt Cookie's husband, would go down to the gambling boats and blow money like it was dandelion weeds. Big Hank, and his wife, Cookie, could afford it. For Daddy it was a mortgage payment.

So our house stayed the same as it had been for my thirty-one years. Even their bedroom still had the milky-tea-colored walls and an old dark ceiling fan whirring over-head. As I sat at the kitchen table, I found the sameness more comforting than I expected. Sure I was a little hung over, but after all the drama in Atlanta, it just felt good to be out from under all the pressure and the constant spotlight.

"Smells good, Mama," I said as I curled a stray strand of frizz behind my ear. "I'm starved. I really am." I inhaled a deep whiff of savory bacon and took a sip of orange juice. "I'm sorry Mama. I know I've been a hermit but I guess today's as good a day as any to clean myself up and go find out what's going on in the world." I smiled as I chewed but then, just as Honey glanced over her shoulder at me, a pang of *uh-oh* hit me right in the gut.

She grinned as she kept scrambling the eggs. I knew wherever she was fixin' to send me might be as awful as the depths of Hell.

She obviously had a story in mind for me to cover, but I felt a knot bubble up in my throat.

"Mama? What are you grinnin' about? You're not sending me to interview that old widow woman at the end of Chestnut Street are you? Everyone in town thinks she's a witch, you know?" I was suddenly chewing much more slowly, as fear usually slowed me down, sometimes freezing me in my tracks.

One summer night long ago, when my sisters and I were little, we'd cooked up a plan to see if old Miss Blackwood was really a witch. We'd waited till dusk, until we were really terrified and walked to the end of Magnolia Trail, sneaking around the side of her white wooden house. The graying skies had hung bloated and low, a flash of heat lightening ripping open the clouds above. I'd gasped and grabbed Carolina's hand. She was a year older than I was, and I called her Carrie—and thought she was the bravest person I knew. Georgia was the youngest of the three of us and went by Georgie most of the time.

Crazy Honey named us all after states. Themes tend to run in the nut of a family I come from. Honey and all her sisters are named after food; there's Aunt Cookie and Aunt Coco, Aunt Puddin and Aunt Sugar. They became known as the Bruce Babes of Cottonwood Cove; all cute, curvy and full of southern sass—my role models.

Anyway, just as the light from the hot night sky had illuminated the front porch, there in the bluish glow had stood old widow Blackwood. She'd stood, dressed in black, arms folded, on her huge wrap-around porch. She'd peered around, looking for who might snoop. Obviously she'd heard us as we crept under a window near the porch.

"Who's out there?" she'd yelled.

Fear ruled. Our hearts raced; mine thumped out of my chest. Another flash of lightning, and we all began to haul ass, screaming all the way, until Georgie had tripped. She'd screamed bloody murder as the night sky opened up and erupted with a downpour of rain, pounding us more fiercely by the second.

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Carrie and I ran back and reached for Georgie's hand, slipping in the mud as we tried to pull her to safety. Then a headlight beamed across the side yard of widow Blackwood, flashing us as it turned around at the dead end of the street. When I looked back down at Georgie, a hand was wrapped around her ankle, pulling her backwards. I lost it. I was always the most hysterical one of us anyway and I never even questioned the "hand" I knew I saw grabbing my sister.

"What're y'all a doin' down there?" old widow Blackwood called to us. "I'm a gonna have to call the po-lice over here. Git on home!" She'd waved her spindly arms wildly.

"Somebody's got her foot!" I'd shouted. "Help us! Please help us!" I was lost in a horror movie of my own making. The rain came down in buckets, slashing at us sideways.

"My God, would you shut up!" Carolina demanded. "That old widow'll be down here in a split second with the cops if you don't calm down." Carrie was yanking Georgie by the arms as hard as she could.

"Somebody's holding her ankle from under the side of the house," I yelled. I kicked the hand and tried to get it to turn loose of my little sister but it gripped her so tight she couldn't even stand up. Another flash of someone's headlight streaked across the yard as Carolina and I dropped to our knees to free Georgie from the stranger's grasp—when we both saw the tree roots.

Georgie was not being held captive by an underground demon, but a hundred-year-old magnolia tree.

"Ohmylord! It's a tree. Pull her harder!" Carrie screamed as she tugged with both of her hands. Georgie was crying and struggling to free herself.

Old widow Blackwood was still creeping around on her front porch and we knew we needed to skedaddle—fast. Remember, we still thought she had the powers of a storybook wicked witch.

"One. Two. Three." Carolina said as she took over, as usual, and together we gave Georgie a heave-ho and both of us fell backwards into the muddy earth, Georgie landing on top of us.

"Ow!" She screeched. "My ankle! It hurts so bad."

"Okay, hop on my back and we'll run for it," Carrie said.

Georgie hopped on her back and we all sprinted home, the rain biting our faces all the way.

We were rain-soaked, muddy and scared out of our minds as we all made a run for it toward our little house at the other end of the street. To this day, Georgie and I both depend on Carrie. The three of us were always scheming and dreaming together. The Scheme Team was what Mama always called us. Today, I was hoping I wouldn't have to call her for help. But with the look in Honey's eyes, something told me I might be needing my older sister before the sunset.



## Chapter Three

I sat in Mama's sunny kitchen, the back door open to the back screened-in porch. The warm sun was streaming in, making the glass pitcher of fresh roses shoot sparkles of light across the table. The outdoor air smelled of freshly mowed grass, and it somehow mixed perfectly with the smells of Honey's breakfast. She sat down across from me just as she finished scrambling the eggs. Peering over her glasses, she shot me that same little smile again. Every time I looked at her, I felt a pang in the pit of my stomach. Honey was up to something.

"Mama! What is it already? Stop looking at me like the cat that ate the canary. Nothing you could send me on could possibly be that bad. I mean, come on—it's Cottonwood Cove for God's sake." I took a bite of eggs and washed it down with a spoonful of buttery grits. I tried to bluff her with my big-city-girl confidence but she could see right through me.

"I guess I could send you down to check on the widow Blackwood." She laughed to herself as she bit into a slice of bacon. "She's still alive and kickin', you know?"

"Ha ha. Very funny. Last time I saw her I nearly peed my pants. She always scared me to death. Seriously, what do you have up your sleeve?"

"There's a new guy in town..." she began, her eyebrows up.

"No, no you don't. You aren't fixing me up with some new guy from church. There is no way I'm up for a date. Just go match-make somewhere else." I rolled my eyes at her and took a bite of eggs.

"Now now, you always did think you knew everything. Let me try again. There's a new guy in town. He's the new head football coach up at the high school. He's a cutie-pie."

"See? I knew it. You *are* tryin' to fix me up."

"Stop it. I am not. He's got a secret. I know it. He's hiding something. He won't talk to any of us at the paper, stays to himself and won't let me even



have an interview. I figured..."

I cut her off again.

"You figured if you sent the former Miss Cottonwood Cove, he'd melt at my beauty and open right up." I was being sarcastic, well at least a little.

"Uh huh, exactly," my mother shot back with a smirk, her eyebrows up, with her own brand of sarcasm. She always had a way of helping me remember just where I come from. "Seriously, maybe he would talk to a big-time reporter from Atlanta."

"Former, Mama, former..."

"Okay, well, he may not know that right off the bat but he's a big-time former Crimson Tide Player from the University of Alabama. He did a stint in the NFL, too and somehow he wound up here coaching high school... that seems fishy to me. I mean he could have gone anywhere; even been a NFL broadcaster which, I think he was trying to do 'fore he got here. So it sho' don't make no sense to me he'd show up here in Cottonwood Cove to coach a little ole middle-of-the-road high school team. Somethin's up with this coach, and I want you to find out what. It may help you get back out there. Ya never know." She smiled as she shoveled in a heaping bite of grits.

*What do I have to lose?* I asked myself. Mama's request didn't seem like that big a deal. I mean he might talk to me. We have something in common already: we both landed in Cottonwood Cove—and just maybe neither of us really wants to be here.

"Okay, give me the info and I'll see what happens. All I can tell you, if he wants to keep his secrets, he will. Nothing I could do will make him talk."

"Well, bat those gorgeous blue eyes and give it your best shot. The Chatterbox needs a good story."

Suddenly, Mama's voice dropped. I could see her thoughts had shifted.

"What? What is it? Is something goin' on at the Chatterbox?"

"Well, you know, it's just—

"What?"

"It's just been strugglin' a lot lately. Most folks get the news from their laptops these days." She smiled at me weakly as she shoved her finger under the rim of her glasses and wiped an escaping tear.

"Mama, why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, this has been coming for a while. It's just that now, we might lose our lease downtown. It would be the last straw." She took her glasses off, the tears coming too quickly now. "My daddy started this little newspaper, and he started it right outta that place on Main Street. I can't lose it. And I refuse to turn it into an online paper." She got up and moved over to the sink, wet a paper towel and wiped her eyes with it. She walked back to the red laminate kitchen table and sat down.

"Can't your sisters chip in? I mean most of them have plenty of money."

"Baby, they don't care too much about the paper. They'd rather see it close anyway since it really doesn't make any money. They aren't even part owners

anymore. They sold all their shares of it to me for cheap a long time ago just to get out from under the debt. I paid the debts all off so, I'm it. I just have to increase the circulation, or sell some more ads or something to keep it going. I am the sentimental one. That's why my daddy left it to me. He knew I'd keep it for you girls. I mean, I even have a reporter for a daughter." She grinned and her tears released down her round cheeks all at the same time.

My heart clenched to see Mama so distraught. She was always so strong. Maybe I could finally do something for her. Help her out, and maybe help the paper out a little bit although I knew one story, even if the football coach was hidin' somethin', wouldn't change the fortunes of The Chatterbox. Still, that cutie-pie coach was gonna talk or I would dig up the dirt on him myself and expose the crap out of him. Motivation filled me like a huge piece of Mama's famous chocolate cake. And gave me that same high of too much sugar. Maybe if I did this story for Mama, it would help Cottonwood Cove folks remember my family's legacy, and they'd renew their subscriptions.

I knew I could never ever stay in Cottonwood Cove. I had more in me than a small-town weekly newspaper but Mama needed me. I drew in a deep breath and leaned back in my chair. I was so torn inside. I needed to be spending my time looking for a new TV reporting job instead of trying to save this small-town paper. But there's a rule in the Deep South—family first. And no matter what, you never ever break the rule. My family legacy was looking like a sinking ship and I had an obligation to do whatever I could to keep it alive. It was important to Mama so it was simple really—that meant it was important to me.

"Listen to me, Mama," I said leaning over the table and squeezing her hand. "There is no way in Hell you're gonna lose the lease or lose the Chatterbox. Me and Carrie and Georgie will never let that happen."

"They don't even know. I'm not sure I want this all over town. And you know, Georgie is the new town crier. Please if y'all start all that scheming again, just be discreet. Keep it under the table. I really need to keep this quiet. Okay? If there's a juicy story with the coach, I want to break it, not the bigger papers."

I stared into her tear-washed eyes. How hard could it be to help her out and give her some hope? I was a reporter, and I'd broken much bigger stories than a small-town football coach.

"Okay, Mama. Don't worry. I got this." I felt my confidence rise up and finally I felt some purpose again. It felt good to be needed. But the pangs to get back to the big time were still pulling me in another direction. *Family First*, I told myself.

I wiped my mouth and gathered my dishes and walked over to the sink. The reporter in me couldn't wait to get all dressed up and get out there. First stop, Cottonwood Cove High School, home of the Cougars. But the daughter in me couldn't leave Mama with the cleanup.

I turned on the water and started to wash when I felt Honey's hand on my

shoulder.

"What are you doin'?" Git on outta here, baby. You got work to do."

"You sure?"

"I absolutely am. That coach might give away his secrets to ESPN. Git goin' girl!"

"I need your car—uhm—mine's still at the Sand Box."

"I know it. I had a call this morning. You know everybody knows everybody and everything here."

That made my cheeks flame, but Mama continued.

"Jamie, that new bartender, said he'd drive it home when he gets off, then I'll run him home from here. He's Erma Mae Gentry's nephew. Don't go a worryin'. We gotcha covered."

God, it felt good to have people who would cover me, even if it were a bit embarrassing after a night like last night.

I could tell Mama was counting on me though. I turned and kissed her cheek. "Don't worry. That Chatterbox will stay right where it is for the next crazy group of nutcases in the family. I'll make sure of it myself."

"Love you, baby. Now that's my girl."

I trotted off to the shower, getting ready faster than my usual two hours of primping I'd done during my CNN reign. I slipped into my best designer jeans, my white dress shirt and a navy jacket. I wanted to look professional, but not too intimidating. I left my Jimmy Choos in the closet and opted instead for black patent sandal wedges a la Anne Klein. I glanced in the mirror one last time, added a spritz of Miss Dior for effect, and grabbed my over-sized Ralph Lauren purse. We do love our designers Down South!

Smiling at my efforts after I hadn't wanted to get out of bed, much less the house for two weeks, I headed for the front door ready to go full reporter mode on Mister Former NFL Now High School Coach. Mama stopped me in my tracks.

"Listen to me, baby. You gotta tread light. When somebody's hidin' somethin' you can't use those big city tactics and just bulldoze in on this man. You gotta give an angle, you know? Walk soft and go slow."

"Are you seriously telling me how to be a reporter?"

"No, not really. I know you know what to do, but just a little reminder this is a really small town. Things need to be done the Cottonwood Cove way."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't show up and bombard him. Instead ask him to get some coffee at the diner—get him out of his fortress. He'll relax a little, and you might make a dent in all that armor."

Humph. She did have a point. Could it be true that I was learning reporting skills from Honey Bruce Hunnicutt? I couldn't even believe that myself, but maybe I had actually inherited this talent—reporting did run in my family, all the way back to my grandfather Bruce who started the Chatterbox himself.

"Okay, I'll figure something out. Now get to work yourself. You've got a

newspaper to run!”

I called the school and left a message and to my surprise the elusive coach’s secretary called me back. I convinced her that I would talk to him about his hopeful star players for the upcoming season rather than focus on his story. That was my angle anyway—make it all about the players. He agreed to meet me later at Catfish Shack down by the marina.

I drove down to the marina and pulled into a parking spot in front of the old Catfish Shack. It was little touristy since we were right on the lakeside, but the food here was delicious and cheap. I looked around the water’s edge. It really was serene out there. The older homes that dotted the lakeside were perfectly coifed, their lush lawns melting into the silvery ribbons of the little inlets. Boats were moored in their slips near the old wooden dock. I drew in a deep breath remembering all my teenage summers out on this dock. First kisses, moonlight swims. There was really no place else quite like the Cove. I smiled and turned back toward the restaurant. I knew the Catfish Shack would be completely unintimidating for the new coach.

The place hadn’t changed a bit in the years I had been gone. Nothing much does in Cottonwood Cove. I walked to the front of the diner that faced the street and pulled the old glass door open, the jingling bells above announced my arrival.

I scanned the little diner. Light green vinyl booths jarred memories from decades ago. This was a place where we’d hung out after games in high school. This wasn’t one of those theme diners, this was the real deal. My grandparents met here in the fifties when he was a bus boy, and she was a waitress. The chrome fixtures and shaded pendant lights flooded me with scenes from my childhood, like coming here on Sundays for Root Beer floats with my sisters. I felt like I was seeing it all for the very first time.

Back in the corner, near the window, I saw the back of a man’s head. He was alone and his dark wavy hair shimmered in the sunlight streaming through the window near the booth. The jingle bells of the front door made him turn and look at where I stood with my bag on my shoulder. He looked directly at me.

Oh no! It was the guy from last night! Oh, shit! He did tell me he was a coach but somehow I pictured like a personal trainer—not a *coach* coach! Oh for God’s sakes, what am I gonna say to him? I *kissed* him. That I *do* remember. Looks like my investigative skills won’t be needed to track down this Greek god after all. There he sits, in all his glory.

He stood and smiled a small dimpled grin at me. He was dressed in perfectly pressed khakis, and a white cotton Polo button-down. Preppy as hell—it was the southern man’s uniform. The stark white shirt set off all that dark hair and tanned skin. Lord help me, I was in trouble. Dark wavy hair and a big football player’s build; tall with broad shoulders, long legs—he extended his hand as I approached. I felt my stomach hit the floor.

“Hey. Jared McIntire,” he said in that lusty deep baritone. I think that’s



what he said. His bluish-green eyes suddenly made me lose my hearing. "I think we've met before." He grinned at me plainly referring to last night. I was mortified, but he looked delicious, even better through clear, un-drunk eyes.

"I'm Ginny Bruce—er, Ginny Hunnicutt." I quickly rebounded with my real last name. Crap! Why did I do that? I thought I'd save my "Bruce" name for my next big TV job but then I realized I needed Hunnicutt now because I had ruined Bruce with my legal troubles and being fired at CNN. Oh, who the hell *am* I?

"Well, when you figure out just who you are, we can start the interview about my team." He snickered. "Till then, what can I order you to drink? I seem to recall you like Martinis. And you like them *Dirty*."

The way he drawled out dirty made me feel excited—like he could see beneath my perfect designer clothes, grinning like he could devour me with one bite.

*You're here to work*, I reminded myself and sternly tried to harness my thoughts.

Okay, so he was gonna tease me. Flirt with me. Maybe it was a defense. Maybe he is trying to hide something like Mama said. My reporter radar, firmly in place, I decided to play along.

"Well, why don't we make things easy, and you just call me Ginny?" I smiled, in a hopefully non-flirty way as I slid into the booth. "And I'll have a Diet Coke, thank you very much." I smiled.

From my research this morning, I knew he had had a great college career but his time in the NFL went pretty much un-noticed.

"Done and you can call me Jared—but I told you that last night. My bet is that you don't remember too much about that." He smiled, ordered his sweet tea and my Diet Coke. "My players call me coach Mac. Now, who did you wanna talk about? 'Cause I heard all about *you* last night."

I could feel my fair skin turn as red as my hair, and even though I ordered it to stop, my reactions rarely listen to me. Better get this over with. I took a deep breath. So much for stealth in this interview.

"Oh Jared, I am so embarrassed." That part was totally true. "I just—well I guess I needed to tell someone. I thought you were pretty low risk since I never saw you before, but—"

"Well, whatever you said is safe in here." He patted his head. Some of it I don't remember myself."

I felt myself relax a bit. He was really nice. He was trying to make me feel better, and it was certainly working.

"I do seem to remember something, though. You were really close to my face when you told me." He peered up at me grinning, reminding me, about my kissing him.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I brazened, my eyebrows raised.



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“Well, whatever it was, my lips are sealed.” He grinned again at his own joke, pressing two fingers to his gorgeous mouth, knowing exactly what he was doing—teasing me as was obviously his way.

He smiled more widely, this time that little dimple showing on his right cheek. I sucked in a breath.

“Okay, let’s get to work here,” he suggested as if sensing I had no immunity to his charm. None. “Who did you want to talk about?”

“Ummmm...”

*Working*, I reminded myself. *Focus*.

“How ‘bout you tell me. I mean who stands out to you?”

Sort of nice save I told myself even as I squirmed in my seat—still so embarrassed at my behavior in front of him last night. I’d kissed him. I’d gotten drunk in front of him, and plus he knew my dark secret—being fired from CNN.

“Well it’s early in the season still so we have a few kids I can tell you about.”

“Okay, shoot.” I got out my pen and notepad and started to write. Just then a young woman came into the diner. She had sandy-colored shoulder-length hair. Jared glanced over to the door when the bells rang. He changed his demeanor in an instant.

“Oh, I need to run to the restroom. I’ll be right back,” he said and jumped up.

With his head down, he disappeared through the back section of the diner. I stared at the new arrival speculatively. Who was this woman? *Secrets*, I thought, remembering what Mama had said about him. Could this woman be one of his? I took a mental picture of her just in case. *Interesting*. Oh, I knew I had to lead the conversation with at least a couple of personal questions. This woman obviously was someone he didn’t want to see, or someone he had to make sure didn’t see *him*. Either way, I knew for sure now that he did have something to hide.

A second thought popped into my head—maybe he just didn’t want me to know they knew each other. If she saw him, she may come over to say hi. Who was he to her? But most importantly, who was *she*?



## Chapter Four

The woman went to the counter and picked up a small to-go bag. She was alone and well dressed and definitely didn't look like she lived here in Cottonwood Cove. She looked more like she lived on the West Coast; all in white with some bling on her designer back pockets, a long gray sweater with a silver chain belt. She paid for her order without looking at anyone and left just as she came in, rather quickly and mysteriously, not really smiling or chatting with anyone. That in itself was noticeable. In the South, we chat with everyone. Just try standing in line at Piggly Wiggly without striking up a long conversation with someone—it'll never work Down South.

To me, the bigger mystery was Jared. Why had he bolted to the bathroom when she entered? He made his way back to our table, his head still down. I also noticed he didn't even begin his return until she had left. He must've been watching from the back.

Okay, I knew I had two ways I could deal with what I had just seen—either I could ask him directly if he knew her, or just let it go. I decided to just play it by ear and see what came up. I didn't want to shut the door before I had even opened it.

"Sorry about that," he said as he slid into the light green vinyl booth across from me. "Too much sweet tea."

He looked like he was covering. He shifted his weight looking at me. But this time the piercing blue eyes told me he was nervous.

"Oh, no problem. I totally get it. When ya gotta go, ya gotta go. Now, you were gonna tell me who are the ones to watch this year. Who's the standout Cougar at Cottonwood Cove High?"

"Well, I do have a kid I think has it all. I mean he really is somethin'. He's our number one wide receiver. I mean get that kid's hands near the ball and man; he'll sure catch it. He's really an amazing young athlete." I wrote that down, great quote. Jared lit up when he talked about his players, and I found

his enthusiasm almost contagious.

"This young man really didn't stand out much till just this year," he continued. "I heard he grew five inches over summer, but he's still got great control over his body. He's really talented. I'm hoping to get some recruiters here before he graduates. Anything I can send in, media-wise, will be good to go along with his films. He may not get a first string pick on signing day but I wanna help him get to a good school that can grow his talent."

"What's his name?" I asked, not looking up from my notepad.

"Nick. His name is Nick Love. I'm really proud of him. He's nothing like a typical high-school kid either. He's even got straight A's and he's never even missed a practice."

"He sounds amazing," I said, going along with my plan of focusing on the players. Initially. "Can I interview him?"

"Well, I'll have to check with him."

"What about his parents?"

"He lives with his grandmother. His mom is not really in the picture from what I understand. I don't really know anything about his dad."

Jared looked down like he was sad for his star player. I loved seeing those emotions seep through his guarded exterior.

The waitress showed up with some more tea for him and my glass of Diet Coke. Jared finally began to relax again. The reporter in me was dying inside at the delay. I wanted to ask about his personal life, the woman, but for the moment he was trusting me and I knew I better not mess this up. Oh, I wanted to ask him the tougher questions. I felt the anxiety building and my heart began to thump in my dry throat. *I will not break*, I told myself. Keep it cool.

"I understand, I guess. I mean a lot of kids have unusual living arrangements these days," I said, doing my best to keep it all light and on track.

The conversation took me back to memories of my own situation. My daddy had some troubles of his own and eventually Mama divorced him before he died. He was a gambler and we had the lights or the phone turned off on a regular basis. But at one time he was making plenty of money selling insurance. We even had a boat in our slip at the little marina near the pier. But eventually he lost most of it. Mama mostly lived on her share of the inheritance from Grandpa Bruce these days.

Daddy came from the other side of town. Marrying him made Mama different from the rest of her own family. She married into the rednecks. All the Hunnicutts still live over there. Last time I visited they still had a fridge sitting on the front porch. It was full of Budweiser and sitting right next to the velveteen couch. Yep, but it was common to have a couch on your porch in that part of town. Oakville; where the have-nots lived.

A big bucket full of crushed beer cans was next to the couch. It was customary that after you drank your beer, the can must be smashed against

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the forehead of the drinker, by the drinker. That meant the beer was good. Like I said, the Hunnicutts were a crazy-ass bunch. Loveable, but crazy. And I knew deep down, I had a tad of the redneck in me. Daddy even taught me to smash my root beer can on my forehead when I was a little girl. At one time I was proud of that.

"I know," Jared muttered, bringing me back to the present. "It's all pretty sad but somehow these kids make do. It's all in the desire."

Spoken like a football coach. I half expected him to blow a whistle and tell me to drop and give him fifty push-ups, so I could see my dream and never lose the vision.

"So how do you know who's got it, and how to bring it out?"

"I just know. I can see it in their eyes. You know like they say, the eye of the tiger? Some have it; some don't. And some just really want it more than others do."

"Were you like that?" Oh crap, I'd blurted out a personal question. Immediately I saw the walls slide up.

"Well, I'm not here to talk about me. Any more questions? I gotta get back to school."

Oh, how do I save this? He can't leave yet. I need at least a nibble. The personal stuff was out there now, so I figured what the hell?

"Oh, before you go I was just wondering, is there a Mrs. McIntire?"

He'd been in the middle of picking up his sweet tea.

"Uh, no." He started to stand up and set the glass down quickly, and it slid on a wet spot and tipped over, splashing the remaining half-glass of tea all over me.

"I'm so sorry," he yelped. "Let me get you some napkins."

He ripped out a wad of napkins of the holder, which tipped over and tumped over my Diet Coke in the process. "Tump" is one of those perfect southern words, a brilliant combination of "tip" and "dump." The liquid was everywhere, running off the sides of the table, all over my bag and me. I slid out in a hurry and jumped up and away from the booth. I crashed into the waitress, who had a tray loaded with food.

"Sugar, what the hell are you doin'?" She tried to catch her balance, but, even as Jared reached for her to steady her, the dray of fried fish and slaw tumbled down all over the folks in front of us.

I just stood with my mouth hanging open, unable to comprehend the disaster that had unfolded in the span of three seconds.

"Y'all, I can't apologize enough." Jared was beet-red with embarrassment. You could tell he didn't want any kind of attention. "Let me pay for something'."

The woman in the booth was wiping slaw off her face.

"Hey, aren't you that new coach?" her husband demanded. "Weren't you a big-time college quarterback? Washed out of the NFL didn't you?" His voice turned nasty as he pushed fish off his lap and onto the floor.



"No wonder, if you're as clumsy as all that," his wife muttered, wiping herself off and glaring at Jared. "Can't even grasp your own glass, much less a football."

I narrowed my best Hunnicutt and CNN-big-city-Atlanta-girl-glare at her before dragging Jared out by the arm.

"Let's get outta here," I laughed as the bells jingled when I threw the front door open and we'd stumbled back out into the gravel parking lot. "We make a lousy team," I teased, still thinking of how silly that woman had looked with cole slaw all over her, while she'd been criticizing Jared.

"She even licked some of that slaw off her," I couldn't help sayin' aloud.

"Oh, no! Your white shirt!" Jared brought me back to my own predicament. "I'm really sorry."

I looked down at the brown stains on my shirt. Plus it was now transparent and you could see the lace of my bra. And the low cut of it. Lovely. What a way to make a professional statement.

"Let me pay for your dry-cleaning bill," Jared offered.

As he spoke, he reached into his pocket for some more napkins and began dabbing me off, the stains over my right breast. His large hands cupped me as he tried to help me dry off the Diet Coke. A bolt of electric heat shot through me, and I looked up at him and smiled. God, his eyes were gorgeous. I could swim in them forever. His eyes widened as he realized what he was doing, and his hand dropped to my waist. I looked up at him and swallowed hard, heat shooting through me now.

"Excuse me," he said, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean...I...."

"No it's okay," I said as breathless as a teenager. And really it was more than okay. My heart was racing and I could feel tiny beads of perspiration building underneath my now-stained blouse. "Don't worry. I'll send it over to the Press and Dress off Main."

"No, I'd like to pay, to reimburse you," he offered.

"Betty can get anything out. She's been there for ages. Don't worry," I smiled.

"Okay well, let me know if they don't and I'll be happy to cover you."

*You will?* My mind leaped to the literal. My heart still raced. His handsome rugged face, angled just so at the jaw with those sweet blue eyes, framed by heavy dark lashes—oh he was just delicious. But my reporter mind was coming back on line, and this would be the perfect opportunity to push the envelope. He was relaxed now, and I knew the door was open, but all I could think about was how sweet he had been last night at the Sand Box. I could tell he liked me but he was afraid of something too. The chemistry and the sexual tension was palpable after he had tried to clean the spilled drink off my shirt. It was a heavy, awkward moment because I wanted to ask the questions, but I could tell he just wanted to dry me off a little more, and I was enjoying his attention. Woman or reporter? I thought about Mama and decided to

become the reporter instead of the object of desire—stupid me. I wanted his hands back on me as much as he obviously wanted to put them there.

Should I lead with the NFL comment or my own burning question about the mysterious woman?

“Hey,” I started, “I was just wondering. Did you see that woman that came in there?”

His hands stilled, damp napkin in his hand. “What woman?”

“The one who came in just before you went to the bathroom”

“No, why?”

“Just wondered.”

He stepped away from me, and I wished I’d kept my mouth shut, but of course I couldn’t. “I thought you saw her.”

“No, I didn’t.” His face was tight. “You sure you aren’t one of those reporters tryin’ to find out about *me*—’cause I’ll tell you right now, there’s nothing to know.”

He leaned into me, but his arms were crossed and his beautiful eyes narrowed, throwing sparks.

“I thought your story was all about my *players*—not *me*. I came here to this town ‘cause I wanted to give back. I had some great high-school coaches and Cottonwood Cove has had only interim coaches for the last few seasons till they hired me. They had been looking for a while, so when they asked me, I came. That’s it. Now if that’s all you’re after, I’d say this is it for us.”

“No.” His words filled me with dread on two different levels. “No.” I tried to soften my voice. “I just saw her and I thought I recognized her. I haven’t been back to town for a while and thought...” I trailed off as his expression wasn’t encouraging at all.

I’d failed. His attitude towards me was a 180. He’d changed, blocked me like the champion football player he was. So I had nothing to lose, not like I hadn’t been here before.

“Why don’t you wanna talk about yourself?” I asked. “You’re a hero. I mean you’re a champion Alabama quarterback.”

“Who said I didn’t wanna talk about myself?”

He paused like he had a thought, and I so didn’t think this was going to help my chances one bit.

“Didn’t you say your name was Hunnicutt?” He looked totally disgusted. “Some woman from that little newspaper’s been callin’ and callin’ me for an exposé, whatever she means by that. Did she send you here? I never even thought to ask if you were with them. I thought you might be from one of the larger state papers. My bad. I guess I should have known better. Persistence—I’ll give that little paper you work for that. But I already told that woman I would not talk to her about my personal life.”

Oh, shit. I knew I had to lie but then he would know I was a liar.

“Not really. She didn’t send me here, but I’m in town for a bit, and I am a reporter. I really did want to start following the players with a new weekly

column." I was trying to judge his response to this as I thought on my feet. "I'm gonna call it One To Watch."

I was throwing anything out there now to save my ass. "You really seem touchy about yourself and that woman."

Me and my mouth. That was it. I knew it.

Jared got into his shiny midnight-blue vintage mustang convertible and slammed his door, gravel spitting up behind him as he tore out of the parking lot.

Shit. *What is wrong with me?* It's like I'm obsessed with that woman. Who is she to him anyway? He has to know her. Has to. But I knew I had to get back on his good side fast. How? I decided I needed the help of the experts. The Scheme Team. My sisters, Carrie and Georgie, would surely help me come up with a plan. I don't give up easily and I could feel it in my gut he had a secret bigger than a southern politician.

And for some reason this made him even more attractive.

## Chapter Five

I drove straight down to the corner away from the water and turned onto Main Street where most all the businesses were situated. The Chatterbox was there in a storefront on the corner. I pulled up to the curb in front of the little newspaper office. I could see Mama working at her desk through the little front window. The old venetian blinds were open giving way to a full view of the tiny space. Old Miss Belle, Mama's 15 year-old "newspaper" cat was stretched out along the front windowsill. The cat was a fat calico, a stray that'd decided to move in to the Chatterbox years ago and quickly became Mama's work partner.

I had to tell Honey what just happened, but I knew it wasn't over. I could use this column about the players, get the kids some publicity and maybe get back in Jared's good graces.

"Girl, I told you to make sure and go slow. I hope you're right about this column. I do think it's a good idea and it'll keep you over there at the football field so you can watch everything, too," she reasoned as I filled her in. "What the hell happened to your shirt? You didn't make that coach so mad at you that he threw his tea at you, did you?"

"No, Mama, he accidentally set it down wrong and it just tumped over. Then he knocked over my Diet Coke too."

"Sounds like you made him as jittery as a long-tailed cat in a room fulla rockin' chairs."

"No, I think it was just a plain ole accident." I decided not to get into the mystery woman who'd strolled into the diner and sent Jared scurrying to the bathroom in a panic. He either had to pee, was nauseous from last night or had wanted to hide—I was picking door number three.

"How's it goin' here?" I asked. I decided to change the subject for now.

Mama moved a little closer to me with her eyebrows arched high. "See that man over there in the green tie?"

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s the landlord of the building here. He’s here to meet with me and the staff to let us know he’s gonna raise the rent at the end of this month. I already know it though—I have some good sources. Says it’s the economy, and he’s got no choice. But I’m tellin’ you, I think he just wants us all out so he can sell it all to some investor. That’s what we all think.”

“Maybe if I can get this column going, we can sell ads for it, increase the circulation a little, so we can raise a little money,” I said, forgetting that I hadn’t been planning to be home for long. “Call his bluff. Let him raise the rent. We’ll pay it with the extra money from the column.”

“I do love the way you think—but honey, he’s gonna double it. He wants us out. There’s no two ways about it. And we’ve been struggling for a while—this could just be the last straw.”

My heart was breaking for her. I was always close to Honey. She worked so hard after she and Daddy broke up. She was always fun-loving and a little nuts. Not like the crazy of Daddy’s family, but nuts in a good way. She’d never thought too much about anything—if she felt it in her gut, she’d just go for it. I’ve always loved that about her. I wanted to help her, but my heart and mind were set on getting a TV job—I didn’t mind helping her out for now, but there was no way I was ever planning to stay in Cottonwood Cove. Too small a town for me. I was used to living in Atlanta, and the whole two weeks I had been home, I’d felt trapped in Mayberry, even though there was a comfort here like no place else. I just couldn’t give up on my dreams.

“Listen Mama, I’m gonna run. I gotta lot to do. Anything I can grab for supper?”

“No, baby. I am fryin’ up that mess of green tomatoes Erma Mae Gentry sent over yesterday. We gonna have us some fried chicken and black-eyed peas. Oh, and I made us some cornbread too! So don’t be late.”

“All that just for us?”

“Well, I’ve invited over a couple of folks from church. Nothin’ special.”

“Oh, Lord, Mama, please tell me you’re not setting me up with some poor unknown guy.”

“Okay, I’m not setting you up with some poor unknown guy.” She gave me that same grin she gave me this morning. The one that screams you can’t trust her as far as you could throw her. *God in heaven, help me*, I thought.

She smiled as I leaned in and kissed her cheek. I decided with the rent going up in two weeks I had no time to lose. I jumped in my car and drove straight over to Carolina’s house. Time to make a plan. Save the Chatterbox, and get my ass back to Atlanta—in that order. And just maybe we could kill two birds with one stone.

I drove up Main Street noticing all the businesses, The Hair Port, the hair salon my aunt Cookie owned, the old movie theater, Lakeside Cinema, where I first made out with a boy. None of it had changed in probably half a century. The old cottonwood trees and live oaks were all still right where



they'd been when I was a child. Somehow I never really noticed it all before. But today they were beautiful; moss hung in lacy shawls, dripping from one branch to another, the sunlight filtering through in a haze of gold.

It felt good to be out, driving around my old stomping grounds, the houses, with huge front porches, breezy with ceiling fans stirring the humid fragrant air. The years I spent on the lake's banks, dangling my toes into the cool water, or squishing my toes into mud, and catching lightning bugs in a jar on those damp warm summer nights all came flooding back.

I swung into Carrie's long drive before I knew it. Seems like my car remembered the way without needing me at all. The sign out front welcomed me down the drive under the tall pines. The black wrought-iron sign announced The Highlands. It was southern and classy. This was the neighborhood of the old money—big southern houses on old tree-lined streets. It was just off of downtown, hidden on a single road between Brooks St. and Spencer Avenue. The house fit Carrie to a T.

I honked the horn twice and Carrie appeared from inside the house. She stood on her wide front porch waving at me. I had seen her once in the two weeks I had been home when she came to Mama's to help me soothe my feathers after being kicked to the curb in Atlanta. It didn't do much good that night, but I knew today would go a little better. We had a plan to make, and that was our specialty.

"Hey girl, get on in here and we'll have us some tea." As I approached, she saw my shirt, "Hell, honey, looks like you've already had your fill of it today."

"Well, I sorta had an accident." I smiled.

I climbed the steps to her porch, the slow whir of the white overhead ceiling fan instantly slowed me. White wicker chairs were scattered around the porch splashed with bright colorful pillows. I leaned over and gave her a hug. She smelled of the gardenia bushes so I knew she had been working in her beloved garden.

Carrie was petite and blonde, with a huge mega-watt smile revealing perfect white teeth. She was always wonderfully dressed, too. The *uppa-crust* southern belle, she always looked like a debutante, complete with a strand of pearls even while working in the garden. She was very in control. Her life was exactly the opposite of mine: chaotic. Carrie's was easy, predictable, and secure. She was just a year older than me but she could have been a decade older with how organized and predictable her life had become. She was in control all the time. Her husband, David, was a lawyer, and he was as well-loved as she was in town. They were fast becoming pillars in the community, which had been Carrie's dream. Carrie never had intended to move away from Cottonwood Cove. We were most definitely opposites.

We stepped inside her fabulous oversized foyer. Hardwood led us inside the old house. It was certainly the house of a small-town southern lawyer. Antique furnishings were scattered about in the parlors to the left and right. The wide curving staircase led the eye upwards to a French country

wonderland.

"Okay, since you've had your fill of tea for the day what can I get you?" She glanced over her shoulder and smirked. She had fresh vegetables cut up on her butcher-block island as if she were getting ready for supper. Bread was baking in the oven. Somehow in this moment, I envied her. She was the queen of domesticity.

"Oh Carrie, this place is so grand. I love it."

"Well, I'm so lucky to have David. He lets me do whatever I want here. I have certainly found that I love to decorate."

"Well I'd say you have found your calling."

"Thanks, honey. Okay, what's going on with you?"

"You know about the Chatterbox, right?"

"Yeah, I know Mama told me they were really struggling. I'm afraid it's a sign of the times." She kept chopping vegetables.

"No, it's worse than that," I almost whispered. "I was just over there and the landlord is raising the rent, doubling it in two weeks. We gotta do something. And I got a bit of another problem," I admitted.

She turned around, curious this time.

"Okay, let me grab us some snacks and we'll figure something out."

I felt calmer already. Carrie had that way about her. She was like a human sedative. She put some homemade lemon cookies out with sweet tea and I filled her in on all the details and all the info I had on the coach too; even the woman in white from the diner.

Carrie was writing. Making a list. Lists were a thing with Carrie. After she had all the info, she peered up at me from under her perfectly blonde highlighted bangs and smiled.

"I think I have an idea."

"You do? Great! What is it?"

"Well, I have been getting into party planning and I think we need to throw ourselves a little party."

"Carrie, I love you to pieces, but how in the world is a party gonna do anything but cheer us up?"

"Honey, it will only look like a party." She stared at me like I was stupid.

"We're gonna *pretend* to have a party?" I asked, feeling I fit her *stupid* label. "How do you propose we do that? I mean people eating cake and drinking champagne is a party, even if it's a fake party."

"No, sweetie, it will actually be a fund-raiser. I did a few of these over the last year and I'm really good at it. Give 'em booze and sugar, and honey, they'll 'bout do anything you ask."

"I'm positive of that," I said still mystified. "But just what are we raising funds for?"

"The Chatterbox, silly. Isn't that who needs the money? Newspapers have sponsors—even I know that. I just read that sponsorships are saving lots of little newspapers all over the country! Now here's what we do. I'll organize

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the whole thing; I have good contacts through all the women's leagues here and all the country-club types. Hell, David works with most of them everyday. I'll invite the list of the wealthiest people in all of Cottonwood Cove."

"Okay, well this will be all up to you, then. I'm happy to assist in any way you need me to. Just tell me what to do."

"Honey, that's been our relationship for over thirty years. Now look, we don't have much time. I'll get that list together tonight and start making calls first thing. I'll make sure everyone knows it's an emergency, and we don't have time to think about it. We'll get the money to push old Mr. Landlord off at least for a while. Who owns that building these days anyway?"

"I don't know but I can sure find out," I said, feeling a little better about Honey's predicament. "Now what about my troubles with the new coach? I really gotta get back in there and see him."

I was unconsciously twirling my curly red hair and wandered off somewhere into Jared's sexy blue eyes.

"Virginia Bruce Hunnicutt! Do I see that wispy look of yours? Really? When you start the hair twirl, watch out."

"What do you mean?" I lowered my guilty hand into my lap.

"You're attracted to this guy?"

"I'm not!"

*I am.*

"He's got a huge secret, remember?"

"Mama thinks that," I defended even though I thought so too now.

"What if he embezzled something? Or is he hiding out here till they find out he's wanted for something? He could be a drug dealer!"

"Oh for heaven's sake. Your imagination is definitely from the Hunnicutt side. That, is crazy, Carrie. Just bat-shit crazy. He's no criminal."

"How do you know that for sure? You said some woman made him race off to the bathroom. He obviously knew her and wanted to make sure she never saw him. Or wait..."

"What?"

"Or—he wanted to make sure you didn't know they knew each other."

"I thought that too."

"Because you were there, he had to make sure there were no complications. If she saw him, she might come over to talk, then he'd have to introduce the two of you. I think he ran off because he didn't want any complications—that's what I think. So now we have to find out who the woman is. I'd start there. She may know exactly what that secret is."

"Okay." I scowled because Carrie had the same reasoning I had had. "But I need to get back in there to see him. I have an angle I think might work. I need to get back in touch with him again about setting up an interview with his new star player. That column is gonna fly—and Mama said maybe the sales staff at the Chatterbox could sell some new ads because of it."

"Staff? You mean Faye Marbury? She's so old she's got an autographed copy of the Bible, and she's the whole entire staff. I don't think her sales are gonna put them over the top."

"I know it, but I gotta try something," I whined. "This is mainly my way back into Jared's good graces. I need this bombshell of a secret."

"Why?"

"Mama says that the story will put The Chatterbox on the map, maybe even help them save the paper. And it might prove that I am still a journalist."

Carrie smirked at me then shook her head, pityingly. "This is Cottonwood Cove, not Atlanta. The Chatterbox is the furthest thing from a big network. You probably won't help yourself a bit unless you find out he's hiding under a fake name and he's wanted for murder in three states. Face it honey, this little Cottonwood Cove gossip isn't gonna change *your* situation much."

Her words washed over me. They were true. Still I couldn't let it go. Gossip rag or not, there was a story there, and even though I'd been fired, I was still a reporter all the way to my soul. I am my Mama's daughter. I gotta go with my gut.

"Well, Mama needs us, and we're going to be there for her."

Carrie nodded.

"So no matter what, we need to get going with everything. I'll head back to the diner to see if anyone knows the woman in white and you get started on the fund-raiser. And I still need to get back to Jared to try to schedule that interview with his player."

"Call him to apologize for today, and remind him you want to feature that young player in your new column," Carrie said. "Tell him it's gonna be the biggest thing the paper has done in years—sadly that's no lie."

Carrie smiled and pushed back from the table. "Touch base with me tomorrow. Let's get Georgie in on this. She's still a pretty good schemer. Maybe she can be your assistant to help come up with a plan for this coach. She's off every day at 5pm. You know she's working over there with Aunt Cookie at the Hair Port till she finds another job. What a nut-case. She's such a free spirit. She said her trip down to the Caribbean set her way back so she's doing little things for Aunt Cookie there. I hear Aunt Cookie's training her though. Georgie always was the primper in the family."

I laughed, remembering Georgie's nickname Carrie gave her, *The High Primptress*.

"Before you go, though, change your shirt," Carrie, ever Miss Perfect Southern Woman, said. "You can't sweet talk anyone with a stain the size of Alabama on your shirt. You can borrow one of mine."

I stood up from my seat and she retrieved a white silk shirt from her closet. I quickly changed and then we walked together to the front door.

"Tell Mama hey for me. David's coming home early tonight. We gotta keep trying for David Jr." She smiled. "I'm ovulating." She grinned ear to ear.



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Last year she lost their first child about four months into her pregnancy. I came home and me and Georgie and Mama helped her through it. Course, all my aunts were there, too. It was good for all of us to band together. The emotional part was the toughest. I knew how badly she wanted a baby. My hopes were so high for her. Thinking of that time, how we all ran to Carrie's side reminded me of just what I was doing and why—the Rule: Family First.

Carrie looked so beautiful standing there in the late afternoon glow of sunlight as it danced through the crepe myrtles near her porch.

I waved goodbye and jumped into my old Saab convertible. It was warm enough to put the top down and the wind relaxed me as it rushed through my red curls. It was good to clear my head too as I slipped back onto the quaint downtown streets. Now, if only I could get that mysterious woman out of my head as well as the heat that pulsed through my body every time I thought of Jared, I might actually be able to focus.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone step from behind a large oak tree and step off the curb. I slammed on my brakes, wincing as I'd been so lost in thought that I hadn't been paying enough attention. Plus the sun had been in my eyes, but still I should have seen her earlier. I pulled to the side of the road and jumped out of my car. A woman was bent over in the street picking up her groceries from the Piggly Wiggly grocery store across the street. Blinded by the glare of the sun, I hurried over and called out my apologies. I was sure I must have really startled her. I bent down to help pick up a rolling apple when I suddenly came face to face with the woman in white.





## Chapter Six

I almost couldn't believe my luck after my earlier disaster. I knew I now had an opportunity I might never get again. The investigative journalist was dying to jump out and attack, but I decided to take it slow, just like Honey advised.

"Oh, my goodness, I didn't even see you. I am so sorry," I offered. "Lemme help you." I jumped right in and helped her pick up her strewn groceries, a can of corn rolling under my car just before I grabbed it. Her purse had partially spilled into the street, but she quickly gathered her things from the ground, wallet first. She was shoving it back in her purse as I approached.

"Why don't you look where you're going?" she snapped.

"The sunlight blinded me. I'm really sorry."

"Glad I stopped when I did." She still sounded angry.

"Me too." I smiled warmly and channeled my ever-polite sister, Carrie.

Well, it looks like I'm okay. No harm." She began to warm up a bit.

"I really do apologize. I'm Ginny." I seized the opportunity and stuck out my hand waiting for her to introduce herself.

"Uhm..." She hesitated.

I let the silence and my outstretched hand hang in the air for a minute. I kept looking at her, hoping the awkwardness would become too uncomfortable and she would just say her name.

"It's Marti. I'm in a huge hurry." She clutched her grocery bag and her purse like I was going to steal them. "Thanks for stopping to check on me."

She smiled anxiously, and the look in her eyes told me she really wasn't interested in making a new friend.

She hurried across the sunny street, not even looking back.

I pulled in a deep breath, my hands resting on my hips, and sighed. The mystery multiplied. Thoughtfully, I walked back around the front of my little

white car and got in. But just as I started the engine, something near the curb caught my eye. I got back out and ran quickly over to the side of the road; stooping down, I could see it was one of those little school pictures that fit into your wallet. I picked it up for a better look.

After I got back to my car, I studied the photograph. It was of a little dark-haired boy with freckles dotted across his nose and big blue eyes. He looked to be about seven or eight years old. I wondered if it might be her son. She looked about the right age to have a young boy. If she had a son he'd be in school right here in Cottonwood Cove, it's such a small town. Maybe I can find out more, I thought.

\* \* \*

"Hey, Mama," I announced as I walked in.

"Hey, honey. Back here in the kitchen."

I threw my purse on the couch and kicked my shoes off near the old fireplace. Honey's house was full of charming character. It had been our house for as long as I had been alive. It was an old house, typical wrap-around front porch and large entryway with lots of plants and ferns moving in the breeze off the porch. Everything was a little worn and dated, painted with muted colors of pale yellows and off-white.

I walked into my room to the left of the foyer and threw my blazer on my bed.

"What can I do to help with supper?" I asked entering the kitchen. Just then I saw a small balding man sitting in the dining room, where places had been set for four. "Mama, what's going on here? I thought I told you not to be setting me up," I hissed.

"No, you told me to tell you I wasn't setting you up with some poor unknown guy—and I'm not. I *know* that guy. Abner Garfield, meet my gorgeous daughter, Ginny Hunnicutt."

I was mortified. He looked anxious and excited. He stood up clumsily and pushed his little wire-framed glasses up to the perch atop his nose. He smiled nervously as he straightened his jacket and pulled at his pants.

"Nice to meet you," I muttered shooting Mama a glare.

"I invited his sister too, you know Amber, right?" Mama never looked up, she just kept to the stove and her fried green tomatoes. That made two things sizzling hot right now in her kitchen! Me and the tomatoes!

Amber and I had met in high school when her family moved down from Nashville. Her brother was already away at school so I never knew him. That was fixin' to change as Abner reached for my hand.

Amber and Abner. So this will be the dinner company. I was dying to tell Mama everything that happened with Carrie and then show her the picture of the little boy. I had gone back to the Catfish Shack after I found the picture and asked some questions. But no one seemed to know Marti personally and no one recognized the picture of the child. One of the waitresses did say they thought that Marti might live somewhere out West but she was here visiting

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relatives. That was all I had to go on.

So I decided to call Jared on the way home. I'd left messages with the school office, then on his answering machine at the gym office, then on his personal voice-mail. He hadn't called back, but I wasn't giving up. Now, I had this ridiculous matchmaking dinner to get through.

"Supper's ready!" Mama announced as she grinned. "Take these in, they're ready now," she said handing me a tray with four bowls of soup. I helped her get it all to the table as we made small talk with the nerd twins. For Mama, this was great. Her table was full, and even if Abner looked like one of those guys from a big box store that worked on computers, I vowed I would suffer through it if it would cheer Mama up. She had been so sad about the situation at the Chatterbox.

"So what do you do, Abner?" I asked to get things going.

"Oh, I work on computers."

I smirked to myself, *I really need to use my observational skills to make some money*, I thought.

"Oh wow, I would have never guessed," I said, super sweetly but dripping with sarcasm as I shot a look to Mama.

Suddenly, Abner started to cough, harder and harder.

"Oh, no. Not your asthma again! Grab your inhaler, quick!" Amber shouted anxiously.

"What happened?" Mama screeched.

"He has such terrible allergies, probably something in the tomatoes."

Abner was fumbling through his pockets when he stood up

"Oh, my Lord, there goes my table," Mama shouted. "Stop! Stop! You've tucked my tablecloth into your pants! Oh, no! All my supper!" Food was being pulled off the table as Abner walked around wheezing. Amber was racing in circles in a dance around him, while Mama and I were trying to grab what was left of the food. Finally Amber found an inhaler in her purse and threw it to Abner. He took a breath.

"I think he might have been sensitive to the tomatoes," Amber said, full of embarrassment. "We're so sorry."

"Well, no worry, I got more on the stove for us later."

"Oh, I think I'll pass, Ms. Hunnicutt. They really don't agree with me," Abner explained.

"Honey, I wouldn't give you another bite if you were starvin'. Now listen, what else can we try?"

"Did you use pepper in all this food here tonight?" he asked apologetically.

"Well, you can't very well make a feast without it—at least I can't."

"Oh, I am so embarrassed, I'm allergic to that if you use a lot."

"Well this is a fine time to tell me that. I guess I'll make you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

*Oh, for God's sake, Mama, let them leave, I prayed. Now's my out.*

"Oh, no Ma'am. It's really okay," Abner said, wiping his mouth.

"Nope, I insist. You're at my table, and so you have to eat something."

*He already did. He nearly ate the tablecloth. For the love of peace, let him go.*

"No, no. We really should get him home. This was just his rescue inhaler. He probably needs a breathing treatment," Amber said.

They both walked into the living room and grabbed their things. He had a jacket even though it was still 75 degrees out and she had her patchwork bag, which I was sure I recognized from twelve years ago when we were seniors in high school. He pulled a used handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose as he reached for my hand to say goodnight.

"Uh, oh, well, yes, nice to see you both," I said as I shook his hand then wiped my hands on the back of my jeans. They hugged Mama bye and shut the door.

"Oh, my good ole dinner—ruined," she whined.

"No, it's okay. Let's sit in the kitchen and eat together," I said putting my arm around her. "It was always my favorite place to eat in this house anyway." I slipped my arm over her shoulder as we headed back to the kitchen.

Besides, I wanted her to see the picture of that little boy. I'll just bet she knows just who he belongs to.



# Chapter Seven

“He sure is a cutie-pie but I don’t think he’s living here right now,” Mama said as soon as I showed her the picture I’d found.

She blew on her soup. “Me and Mable Earnest are such good friends, and sometimes I help her out at the school board. I can take it over to her. I mean we only have one elementary school in town so it shouldn’t be too hard to track him down—if he’s here,” Mama deliberated. “I’ll do my best.”

She took a bite of her homemade fried green tomatoes and leaned back in her chair and smiled. “I really am good at this,” she said assertively. “I don’t mean to brag, but I’ll put this up against any restaurant in town!”

She was right; Mama’s cooking was the best in town. And that gave me a great idea.

“Carrie and I are doing a fundraiser for the paper soon. She’s working on it right now. Maybe we could raffle off some of your southern cooking. Or hey, we could enter it in that contest in a couple of weeks down at the Lakeview Park.”

“You mean, the Eat-n-Greet? I’m not up to that level.”

“Of course you are, but we can sure serve them at the fundraiser.”

I caught myself saying, “we” and before I knew it, Mama looked up at me and smiled, reaching across the old laminate table and squeezing my hand. I knew she needed me, but she was never the type to ask for help. She would just go it all alone and hope for the best. I suddenly felt like I was in the right place at the right time—maybe for the first time ever.

As we finished up, I heard my cell ring from my purse in the bedroom. My ringtone was “Georgia On My Mind.” It had been since I got my job in Atlanta. I was still hopeful. But right now, I was confusingly comforted to be right here.

“Hello?” I said, grabbing my phone.

“Yes, this is Irene Dorsett up at the high school.”

"Hello," I said, relieved someone was finally calling me back. It was early evening, so practice must have just finished.

"I'm calling for Coach McIntire. He would like me to tell you he is not able to speak with you at this time, and he no longer thinks it's appropriate for you to interview Nick Love or any of the players."

"No." I was stunned. "Please, I need to talk to him. I need to have access to the players for the column I'm starting for the paper."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," she said with an edge to her voice. "He is aware of your requests, but he is saying no, and he's asked me to tell you to stop calling."

"But," I began, wildly thinking of a way to change her mind.

"Thank you Miss Hunnicutt," she cut me off. "I know you are doing your job, but he is no longer interested in the column and is busy. He needs to focus on his team. Thank you. I'm sorry. Bye-bye."

Ugh! She hung up on me. I couldn't believe it. I flung myself down on my bed staring at the ceiling. This was a small high school football team in a small town for an even smaller paper. I would come up with something. I had to.

"Mama, I'm going out for a little while, don't wait up, okay?"

"Where ya' headed?"

"I just have a few things to do. Call me if you need me." I grabbed my blazer and purse and skipped down the stairs. I called Carrie from the car.

"This better be good, I'm kinda in the middle of something."

"Oh shit, sweetie, I am so sorry, I forgot about your plans to try to make a baby—are you like in the middle of it?"

"Hell no, I would have never answered the freaking phone. David's in the bathroom, what is it?"

"I need Jared McIntire's home address."

"And why would I have this?"

"I thought you could look it up while I'm driving."

"Contrary to popular belief, I do not have my laptop in bed with me—at least not all the time. Besides, you're not going there now are you? Oh please, tell me you're not heading there now? It's night, Ginny. This isn't Atlanta. You can't just ambush him with reporters at his door."

"It's not reporters... it's just one reporter—me. He's had the school call me and tell me to stop calling. I think I need to have a word, or at least a drink with him."

"I don't have time to talk you out of it. Let me see, he recently joined the Jaycees, and the new membership papers are right here on my desk—yes, here it is, he's at 4109 Sycamore Street. Now don't get into trouble. And no matter what, do not call me back. I'll be —tied up so to speak." She giggled and hung up.

I drove through the center of town and turned left onto Sycamore Street, rolling slowly till I saw the painted numbers on the curb, 4109. The porch

light was on as well as the living room light.

I could see him moving around inside. He was on his phone. The honey-yellow glow coming from inside the old craftsman-style house under the canopy of trees looked inviting. I spied a porch swing with a scattering of crimson and white striped pillows. University of Alabama colors. It was a warm place that looked very settled. Not like he had just been there for a few months.

I took a deep breath and moved toward the porch when suddenly I saw a woman inside. She was a brunette and had a wine glass in her hand. I ran up the steps and stood to the side near a huge hydrangea bush so no one could see me. My heart was banging in my chest so hard I could feel it in my throat. I knew I should just knock on the door, but seeing him with a woman upset me. Maybe that's why the house looked so settled; it had a woman's touch.

I was surprised at my attitude. But somewhere in the depths of my heart, I knew this guy was different. Hopefully, Carrie wasn't right, and he wasn't so different—as in running from something—or someone. Surely the school had checked him out before he was hired. I don't know why I felt the way I did. He was a bit of a flirt at times, suave and confident but mysterious with whatever he was hiding. I liked him, but why was I thinking about him so much? It wasn't as if I had any intentions whatsoever of staying here in Cottonwood Cove. But something inside me wanted to jump through that window and knock that red wine right out of her skinny little hand. Why did I feel a pang of jealousy? I had no idea. Maybe I just wanted every man to belong to me. Cleopatra had always been one of my heroines.

Just then, I saw her set her glass down on a nearby table and tippy-toe up, slowly put her arms around his neck and kiss his cheek. Oh no, I thought, she's leaving, and I'm right here. I wanted to run and hide but it was far too late as I saw her grab her purse and before I knew it she opened the front door. I stepped slightly back, just one baby step too far and shit, I was down the side of the porch, lodged in the hydrangea bush, my ass wedged between two limbs, my feet above my head. I had a fragrant petal in my mouth. I dared not make a sound or budge even in the slightest, or I'd be discovered, but my ass needed, well, repositioning.

"Well, you take care and no funny business, okay?" The woman said as she headed down the stairs.

I had to stifle a sneeze as the hydrangea petals tickled my nose and mouth.

"Jared, it sounds like you might have a furry visitor in this plant. You should set a trap or call an exterminator."

She thinks I'm a raccoon? Oh, for once, Virginia, keep your mouth shut. But just as I tried to move ever so quietly to the left, to unstick the stick in my ass, "Aaggghhhhh!" I let out a scream to wake the next county. A real live animal brushed underneath my backside, and no, not a raccoon—I would have loved it if the tail of a raccoon had brushed against me, no, not my luck. Nope. Instead, a skunk ran right underneath me. A SKUNK!

“NO!”

Oh, Lord have mercy! Why me? I let another screech rip as I fell the rest of the way through the bush and landed on the muddy ground below.

“Oh, my sweet baby Jesus!” She ran back inside. “You’ve got a prowler. Call the police!”

I heard loud footsteps on the front porch stairs and tried to make myself as tiny as possible. Jared was coming. There was a skunk nearby. All I wanted to do was run, but the skunk had plans of his own. I got a bath. And I don’t mean the lovely kind with lavender-scented bubbles. I am never that lucky, but I was in a heap of trouble.

# Chapter Eight

“We need the police!” I heard the dark-haired woman say. “We have a prowler.”

“Who the hell is in there?” I heard Jared’s angry voice. “My God! It’s a skunk, not a human,” Jared called out. “That smell is horrendous!”

Instead of panicking, which a normal person would do, the reporter in me popped out and I became analytical. Okay, I had a choice. I could stay quiet and hidden, and let them think it was just a skunk, or I could let Jared find me and have him help me out—and draw me a tomato juice bath. If I stayed quiet, the cops were likely to find me, but I could risk it. If I surrendered, I risked Jared’s wrath, and would have some creative explaining to do about why I am in his bushes, covered in blue petals, mud and skunk stench. Oh, what’s a girl to do with such a plethora of lovely choices?

Suddenly, I felt a hand on the top of my thigh. It was a huge hand. “Got somebody!”

Jared had shoved his hand into the bush and gripped my thigh like it was a football he was fixin’ to throw. “Some scrawny-ass kid is down here—thighs as small as a little boy. Get the hell outta there,” he screamed.

“Ow!” I screeched as his grip became tighter.

“Sounds like a woman! Oh my God! Who’s in there?” He was angry as hell.

Jared reached into the hydrangea bush with his other hand and yanked me out, half his face stuffed down in his shirt to protect him from the fragrance of the rodent. I came flying out as he jerked me to my feet, stumbled and landed right in his arms, face-to-face. He sure smelled better than me. Delicious, in fact.

“You? What are you doing in my bushes? Oh my God, that stench is unreal.”

“I—I was, uh, coming to visit you,” I managed.



"I thought I had the secretary call you not even an hour ago and tell you to drop it, you're not getting an interview. Not with me and not with Nick. Now why don't you just go back to Atlanta and leave me alone?"

"Look, you know I haven't worked in Atlanta in several weeks. I told you that when we were at the bar that night. I'm home helping my family out and am trying to do my job by starting this column we've been promoting. At least let me interview Nick."

"No! You seem hell-bent on prying and that's not what this team is about. Now stay away, or I'm gonna let those cops take your little scrawny butt downtown tonight when they get here—you and that sweet aroma." He looked away and giggled a little to himself, laughing at the skunk stench I was sure. I felt like there was more teasing going on but he obviously didn't want me to think that. He was trying to be the tough football coach. I decided to play along.

"Ugh! You are so exasperating. Are you always this infuriating?" I said to him as I stumbled the rest of the way out of his bushes, brushing the dirt off.

"Only when I find a little redheaded spy in my bushes," he shot back.

I could tell he wasn't really as mad as he wanted me to believe. He could hardly contain his laughter at my meeting with Mr. Stink.

The sirens of the police cars came blaring up the street.

"So what's it gonna be? Stop bothering me or you will have a nice little ride to your new 6x12 bedroom for the night."

"You are such an ass! I didn't do anything but ask about that woman. And now you have another woman here. Maybe you need to be investigated!"

"Okay, have it your way." Officer," he shouted, "over here."

"No, No, Okay you win. But please reconsider me talking to Nick. Please. He could use the exposure. The recruiters will start showing up and all the write-ups will be good for him. Don't let your attitude about me interfere with his future—I mean if he's as special as you say he is."

I knew deep down Nick had the eyes of the state newspapers on him but this was a tiny little hole-in-the-road-town. And Nick had just begun to shine. He was late to blossom, so I knew any exposure he could get sure wouldn't hurt. Jared knew that, too. It was all I had to go with. I crossed my fingers.

Jared stepped back and heaved in a deep breath. The officers ran over with the other woman. "It's okay. I know her. She just fell off the porch." He glanced at me and smirked.

"Alrighty, everything's okay then?" The first officer asked.

"Yep. We're good. Thanks for comin' so fast."

"Okay then, night y'all."

The officers left, and the unknown woman, Jared, and I stood next to the hydrangea bush in an awkward silence.

"My lord honey, I sure hope you have enough tomato juice for a week of soaks. People will know yer comin' from a mile away," the woman said.

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"Thanks for the clarification. Do I know you?"

"No, sweetie, I don't think so, but I sure know you. Hidin' out here in good ole Cottonwood Cove lickin' your wounds?"

"Not exactly. Your name?"

"This is my sister, Jill. I just told her all about you before you—well, I mean you could have knocked," Jared explained.

"Well, lovely to meet you but I have an appointment with my bathtub and several gallons of tomato juice. Thank you for not turning me in," I smiled an embarrassed smile at him. "Goodnight."

"Just a minute," Jared ordered. "What were you doing here? What did you want?"

"I just wanted you to reconsider, that's all, not about yourself but about Nick. I really do need to get that column in this weekend's paper. The name of the column is One To Watch and it will come out Saturday afternoons just after the game every Friday night. People can read about which player is a standout under the field lights the very next day just after you and the players take the field. Come on." I glanced over at his sister. "Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

"I'll try but he's pretty hard-headed. Usually no is no." She smiled a little half-grin.

"Okay, well just please think about it, okay?" I looked at them both, begging them to give me another chance.

"I'll think about it," he almost agreed.

"Thanks," I said. "Night y'all." I walked back to my car, barely able to stand myself; the stink was choking me.

I rolled the windows down, lowered the top so as not to stink up my cute little car. The investigative reporter in me knew Jared must be hiding some God-awful secret to be so touchy. He was protecting himself. I figured there must be something painful involved. Man, if I could just get to the truth, it could save the paper, 'cause our tiny Chatterbox would be the one paper breaking the story and I would be the reporter—it's a win-win, I thought. I just couldn't let it go. And the more Jared resisted, the more I was determined to dig up all the dirt. That was as soon as I got this real dirt and skunk stench off me.



## Chapter Nine

“**G**ood God Almighty, what the hell did you go and do, girl?” Mama yelped as soon as I entered the front door. She was sitting in an old tapestry wingback, her glasses resting on the tip of her nose as she glanced up from the Charleston paper. “Please tell me that skunk isn’t in your purse. What in the world happened?”

“I stopped by the coach’s house and fell off his porch into a bush where I surprised a skunk. I need tomato juice—now. I’m miserable.”

“You never did take no for an answer. Spunk, baby, that’s what you’re made of. You are sure full of that. Now you’re a spunky-skunky baby!” She laughed at her own joke. “Let’s see if we’re gonna be able to breathe around you anytime soon.” Mama got up and went to the kitchen and opened the bottom cabinet of the pantry, grabbing two bottles of tomato juice. “Go soak—go soak for several hours, then come back out here and tell me all about it. Meanwhile, I’ll say a rosary that you won’t stink so bad when you get out. It’s gonna take all the angels in heaven to get rid of that smell.”

I staggered into the bathroom and closed the door, saying a few prayers of my own. I silently wished there was a patron saint of skunk stench.

\* \* \*

After a long hot, deep red soak, I felt like vegetable soup. I got out of the tub and pulled on my white cotton robe. Grabbing the pink towel next to the vanity stool, I rubbed the fabric roughly through my hair as I made my way into my bedroom. Just as I dropped the pink towel on my bed, I could see my cell phone lit with a message. I sat down on the soft blankets; the windows were open to the early autumn night air, still sticky and warm. It was so quiet outside. Peaceful. I looked at my phone and didn’t recognize the number. That probably meant it was some paparazzo from CNN wanting a statement. These calls had come in on a pretty regular basis since I was let go. It had become a habit to just ignore them.

But for some reason, this one was pulling me. It struck me because it was a local area code for Cottonwood Cove. No harm listening to the message, I thought. I pressed the screen and hit speaker.

"Miss Ginny, this is Jill McIntire, coach Jared's sister—well, he's decided that if you'll be patient, and I know that may be impossible, he'll talk to Nick and set up an interview for you. Call me back."

Oh, I could not even believe my ears! I knew it. He wanted that kid to shine, and he knows he'll need a media outlet to do it—or at least it sure couldn't hurt. I made my plans for tomorrow thinking of questions for Nick and where we might do the interview. I ran in to tell Mama but the house was already dark. She had gone to bed. I was so excited but I didn't want to wake her up. The Chatterbox had been in her family forever, and I knew deep down she was stressed. But between this column, Carrie's fundraiser and the big secret I planned to dig up on Jared, The Chatterbox would be back on the map.

How could I sleep? I had to keep the windows open 'cause I still couldn't stand the smell that clung to me.

I pulled off my robe, and slipped on my thin cotton nightie, still detecting a hint of skunk. I could barely sleep—questions for the star student football player played in a loop in my mind. But mostly, I was bothered. I was still so frustrated with Jared. Infuriated really. I tossed and turned, trying to think of how to get him to trust me. Not that he should, I told myself, but the attraction was growing more intense. I could tell he liked me too.

But I wanted that secret. I was obsessed. What was he hiding? It must be something awful, and I was almost certain it had something to do with that woman I nearly killed with my car.

I closed my eyes and tried to be still but then another thought crept into my head. I kept returning to being stuck in that hydrangea bush and feeling Jared's big, strong hand on my thigh. I had liked it, but I couldn't let myself like this guy too much. It might compromise my reporting. My heart raced and between that and the stink, it was a restless night.



## Chapter Ten

I woke with the sun streaming in the window; the pale yellow curtains danced in the gentle morning breeze. Instead of turning back over, I was so glad that sleepless night was over, I sat up and grabbed my phone and called Jill—I wanted that interview today.

“Hello?”

“Jill? This is Ginny Hunnicutt. I’d love to meet Nick this afternoon. I can come to practice and take notes, if that works for everybody.” I jumped right in.

“That’s fine. That is just what Jared wanted to do. Okay, I’ll let him know. I’ll be there, too.”

“Great, see y’all then.” I don’t know why that man never called me himself. It was like he had a harem around him.

I showered and dressed in record time, then flew into the kitchen for a quick bite. Mama was sitting at the table with the full breakfast. I was in a hurry, though, because I wanted to go back to the Catfish Shack. I knew there might be a chance I could find that woman if anybody who worked there could answer some of my questions. Mama still had the picture of the little boy, and I really wanted to take it with me today.

“Mornin’, Mama, I’m in a huge hurry,” I said reaching over her and grabbing a piece of toast.

“No, now sit down, and eat. You’re runnin’ ‘round here like a house afire.”

“I got an interview with that young player for the new column and I need to work on his back story. Also I gotta check with Carrie on the fundraiser for the paper. I have a huge day and I’m so excited so I better get goin’. Hey, can I have that picture back of that little boy? I’m hoping someone in town might recognize him.”

“Sure, lemme grab it.” Mama got up from the chair and reached for her purse. She had opened the back door to the screened porch and the warm air

floated inside carrying the fragrance of the magnolias that littered the backyard.

"Okay, I'll let you out of not sittin' down for breakfast today since I love seein' you so happy and busy. I am so excited that you girls are doin' the fundraiser! I heard about sponsorships, and it just may be the way to go. Now go get 'em, baby." She smiled as she handed me the little school picture. I leaned down to kiss her cheek and started to head out the front door.

"Sweetie-pie, uhm, did you take that bath last night? I mean you're still a little—uhm—pungent." Mama was squinting her eyes like it was tough to get the words out. Or tough to breathe.

"Yes, but it just won't go away. Can't you even smell my perfume at all?"

"Whatchew wearin'?"

"Okay, I guess not. I used half a bottle of Flowerbomb this morning. You sure you can't smell it at all?"

"Nope, I smell skunk-bomb, not Flowerbomb—nothin' else."

"Well, hopefully it will fade as the day passes. Gotta run," I grabbed my purse and turned toward the door. "Love you, Mama."

It was strange considerin' where I'd been working for so many years, but I seriously had not been this excited about a story in so long. To tell the truth, sometimes, when I was at CNN, the pressure would make me feel a little nauseated just before my story aired. This felt good. Fun. Busy, but relaxed.

Frustration followed me around all day as I showed the picture and asked about Marti, the woman in white. Before I knew it, time had flown and it was after lunch. I knew I needed to get over to the school for football practice. Jill was gonna be there, I was sure. Maybe I could get her to trust me—she sure seemed like the type that would talk after a few mimosas.

I pulled up into the parking lot of Cottonwood Cove High School, home of the Cougars, as the sign on the front lawn announced. Memories flooded me as I shifted into park. I sat still in my car, taking in the unchanged view through my windshield. I didn't make it back for our ten-year high school reunion three years ago. I was on assignment for the network and didn't think it was anything at all necessary. Maybe I had been wrong.

Vivid and warm memories held me for a moment. Homecoming with Drew Higgins, prom with Brooks Mayfield. He was the most handsome guy in school. And I was crowned Cottonwood Cove Queen my senior year too. I got to ride on the back of a little red convertible, waving at everyone and blowing kisses. Wow, sitting there in my car, that seemed like a lifetime ago.

I made my way to the back of the school and found a spot on the bleachers, just as practice began. Jared was certainly right. Nick was amazing. He never missed a pass, even passes that were awful—somehow he could jump up with all that height and grab the ball for a touchdown. Luckily for the quarterback, Nick was as nimble as a cat. I found myself cheering for him—out loud. Well, I couldn't help myself. He seemed like the type of kid anyone would cheer for; so talented, and friendly, slapping high fives and fist

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bumps to his teammates.

I looked over and realized Jill was making her way up the stands to see me. She smiled, but I could tell we wouldn't be friends. At least not right away. She was here to make sure that everything went according to plan. Great, I thought, an overprotective sister. I waved back. Jill wore bright orange lipstick and way too much peach blush. Huge gold earrings dangled from underneath her teased brunette hair. Her hair was so high it was like she was trying to make contact with Jesus, but I kept my mouth shut, because Jill was the gatekeeper to Jared, and I didn't want to fumble the key she was reluctantly offering me.



# Chapter Eleven

“Hey girl, mind if I sit?” she chirped.

“Not at all,” I offered, scooching over and patting the steel warm metal of the stands.

“Isn’t that kid somethin’ else?” she asked popping a piece of gum into her mouth. “He’s really fast, too.”

“Yeah, I’ve been watching him all afternoon. I’m just amazed.”

“He’s a sweetheart, too. And not a bit shy. He’ll be happy to talk to you. You know? He’s that special athlete; he can play, get the grades and talk to the media. He’s never at a loss for words. I just love ‘im.” Jill turned to watch Nick make another touchdown, then burst into cheers. Here was my chance.

“You sound great! Were you ever a cheerleader?”

“Oh, honey, that was many moons ago,” she said, smacking her gum and grinning at my noticing her skill.

“Where?” I slipped in the questions I knew I needed to know to get background on Jared.

“In Tennessee, Jared was the quarterback back then and I cheered.”

“How did you get here? I mean I know Jared took this job but what about you?”

Jill never looked at me. She was watching the field the whole time and just chattering away, smacking that gum, so I kept right on with my friendly questions.

“I didn’t wanna be all by my little lonesome up in Tennessee.” She shrugged. “So I came here and found some work. Moved in last month.”

“Oh, that’s so wonderful, so both of y’all can be together now,” I suggested with a smile.

“Yep; well, I thought you were here to chat about Nick, not me.” She suddenly stopped, realizing she had said too much. I had a feeling this was pretty much on par for her—talking too much. Ahhh, my new best friend. I



backed off, chatting casually the rest of practice.

"Is Jared married?"

"Honey, are you askin' as a reporter or as a woman?"

"As a woman. He certainly is easy on the eyes." I smiled.

"Nope, not at the moment. He's just layin' low for now. Never was married but had lots of women; you know how the NFL is?"

"Sure." I frowned a little thinking of Jared with so many different women.

My interest in him was growing, and I wasn't sure it was good.

Practice ended with all the players clapping on the field. I headed down the bleachers to Jared. He was waiting with Nick, his hand resting on Nick's shoulder. I hurried to meet them.

"Hey, Ginny. Thanks for coming," Jared said formally. "I'd like you to meet Nick Love, our first string wide receiver."

Both of them were sweaty. I stood next to Jared. God, he was big. His athletic build and six-foot-three frame made me feel so small—and so hot.

"Nice to meet you," I said, extending my hand.

"Thanks for coming. I'll get cleaned up and meet you back in coach Mac's office in five minutes, okay?" Nick seemed friendly and out-going.

"Sure." I tried to ooze charm. "You sure were impressive out there," I added.

Nick was a gangly seventeen-year-old, dark hair with a perfect complexion. A few childhood freckles lingered on his baby face. He had beautiful blue eyes and dark really curly hair. He was so tall, well over six feet. It was no wonder he could catch anything; one good leap and he was air-borne. With all that height he could be catching stars. And that was exactly what Jared was hoping for, I was sure.

Nick hustled off to the locker room and I looked up at Jared. He was watching Nick. Pride filled his eyes.

"Told ya." He grinned. "The kid's got it all."

"He sure does," I agreed. "Thanks so much for letting me have the interview."

"Keep the questions all about him and his dreams, not one other thing, got it?"

"Deal," I said. I wanted to cross my fingers behind my back just like Veruca in *Willy Wonka*. But I knew I had better be good.

We all walked back to Jared's tiny office and sat down. Jill stood to the back like an armed guard. His desk was a mess, littered with papers, newsclippings, rosters and files. On his wall, memorabilia hung in mismatched frames from his years at the University of Alabama. Crimson and white shakers sat on his credenza—those were Alabama's school colors—along with his jersey in a shadow box: number 15. I caught sight of his diploma on top of a bookcase. He was older than I thought. If he'd graduated in 2001, that would make him thirty-five years old. He had a couple of NFL shots hanging there and one lone shot of his football days from high school—

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North Nashville High School Titans.

Jared had been so successful. I saw his awards hanging up behind his chair. I couldn't help but wonder: with his looks, experience and sexy low voice, why wasn't he a commentator somewhere? I tried to look like I wasn't looking around and thinking about everything, but the thing was, I felt he couldn't ever be totally open. Totally honest. It was something I just couldn't put my finger on. I knew that whatever that secret was, it seemed to be eating him away from the inside.

I wanted so badly to know everything. But I had promised to be a good girl—so difficult for me. One thing seemed clear. He really wanted to help this kid shine. I certainly knew we could find common ground there.

Nick arrived like a bright light. He was instantly likeable. Smiling and talkative, he plopped down in the chair in front of Jared's desk, right next to me, gangly arms and legs stretched out everywhere. Before I could begin, Jill stepped over to Jared.

"I can see y'all are fine, so I'm gonna mosey outta here," Jill announced. "I gotta get over to the hair salon 'fore they close. I'm tryin' out a new girl there, Georgie, I think."

"That's my sister and The Hair Port is my aunt's hair salon," I chimed in.

"Well I love 'em. They have given me the "do" I've always dreamed of, honey. Ta Ta." She stopped and looked at her brother. "Jared, have a great night and," she shot a strong look at me, "I do hope you get no more prowlers tonight." She smirked as she walked out.

"She's fun." I smiled sarcastically at Jared. He shook his head and grinned, a lone deep dimple escaping.

"So Nick, I began, "tell me all about yourself." Just then Jared's cell phone rang and he stepped out to answer it. I could hear his heavy footsteps as he moved just outside the door to the hall.

"Well, I've been playing football my whole life," Nick began. "It's all I can remember, from the time I could walk I was carrying a football."

I wrote as he chatted, taking notes for quotes I might wanna use.

"Who did you practice with all those years while you were growing up? I mean is there another Nick Love coming up behind you?" I kept writing as I smiled at him.

"Oh, no, ma'am. I'm it. I'm an only child."

"Oh, so did you practice with your dad growing up?"

"No, I never knew him. I live with my grandparents."

"Oh, that's nice. Have they always raised you?"

"Yep. My mom lives outta town."

I sat back in my chair. I felt a sudden sadness for Nick. He was so cute and sweet and earnest.

"So what are your hopes for a college career?"

"Well, of course the dream is Alabama. But really, anywhere in the SEC would be awesome! I just wanna keep playing."

He was right. The South Eastern Conference had dominated college football forever. And Alabama had more national championships than any other college in history. It made me wonder if Jared had plans to help him with all of his connections. Now I could see why Jared was so attached to this fine young athlete. He needed a leg up. I found myself wanting to help him too, wanting my column to be a success to help Mama and now Nick.

We finished up the interview and I stood to shake Nick's hand.

"Look, here's my card. I will do my best to help you get your name out there, and believe me, I'll be in the stands every Friday night yellin' for you. Please call me if you ever need anything or would just like to give me a quote about the week's game, and especially if you make that big decision about where you'll be going to college."

"Oh, thank you so much, Miss Hunnicutt. I will for sure." He smiled and shoved my card into his jeans pocket.

"And, please, call me Ginny."

"Yes, Ma'am. Thanks again for talking to me. I enjoyed meeting you." He reached down for a second to tie his shoe. "And I think Coach Mac kinda likes you. He was excited you were coming here today."

What?

Yeah, you were all he talked about this afternoon. I could tell. Don't tell him I told you."

"Oh, he was probably just happy I was gonna be writing all about you," I answered back, a little excited now myself.

"Yeah well, coach is great." Nick grinned and stood up. He grabbed his backpack and left the little room.

This young man might be the most impressive young person I had ever met; manners, respect, and just pure talent. And maybe a little insightfulness too. But he wasn't full of himself at all. His grandparents had done a hell of a job. Suddenly I had a great idea. I needed to include his grandparents in this article. That would be awesome. But how could I do that? I would have to go through Jared. I hadn't even asked for the names of Nick's grandparents for fear Jared would peek back in and stop the interview. Maybe I could find out through Mama and her friend at the school board.

"So whatdya think?" Jared broke my train of thought as he stepped back into his office from taking his phone call.

It was now just the two of us inside the little room. He was just a couple of feet from me and my heart began to race. I hadn't been this close to him since that night in the bar. I knew it had to be pure lust. I could smell his aftershave mixed with the afternoon's practice. His face was still flushed with the afternoon sun and the deep red made his blue eyes sparkle. I just—I just, well I knew he might be hurting behind all that gruff and I was always such a softie. I could see it somehow.

"He *is* quite something," I answered him. "Super impressive."

"What is that smell in here?" Jared stopped and sniffed the air. "Oh, it

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must be Eau De Skunk. It's my favorite." He grinned at me.

"For your information, I bathed in tomato juice—twice."

"Well maybe three times is the magic number." He grabbed his shirt and stuffed his nose back inside like he did last night.

"Okay, I'm leaving," I said as I shoved my note pad into my over-sized red leather bag. "You didn't seem to smell it before," I said.

"I did, but I didn't want to embarrass you," he reasoned.

"Okay, a girl can take a hint."

"No," he smiled. "I don't mean to run you off, but this *is* a small room, you know."

"Thanks again, I really mean it. I'm trying to help my Mama out. This was great."

"Okay, no problem." He smiled and started rummaging through the papers on his desk. The frustration rose in my chest. I wanted so badly to know what he was hiding. I had a million questions swirling in my head. His bright eyes glanced up at me, as if to say, *you still here?* I knew I needed to go.

"I'll walk you out if you like." He suddenly shattered the awkward silence—and shocked me at the same time. He wanted to walk me out? Was he being friendly or maybe he was trying to get rid of me—like if I didn't leave, he'd just walk me out. Or maybe he'd kiss me again, or let me kiss him, which would be wrong now that I knew him and unlikely, given that he'd just reminded me of my smell.

"Uhm, sure." I agreed though I knew the way. I'd spent four years of my life at this high school. But maybe the more time I spent with him the more he would open up. I knew I was probably dreaming but no matter what, walking anywhere with him had to be good.





# Chapter Twelve

We arrived at my car, the sunset shooting lavender and turquoise stripes across a quickly darkening night sky. Jared was inches from me as we walked to the front of the school. His arm grazed mine and sent a wave of prickles on my skin. I think he knew it, too—the undeniable chemistry—literally arcing between us. He was chatty. Nothing personal though.

“Okay, this is me,” I said arriving at my car. I turned to face him, my hand on the door—he was a breath away from me. I could smell his minty gum as I looked into those gorgeous eyes. His skin held a glow in the shadows like we were in candlelight within the sunset. My heart raced being so close to him. I could tell he knew he was too close, but he was aggressive and didn’t care how nervous he was making me.

“Okay, well thanks for coming,” he said. “We’ll set something else up for next week’s column then.” He grinned at me.

“Ah, yeah, sure. Sounds great. You have my cell just in case?”

“Just in case what? You need me to bring you some more tomato juice?”

Thoughts of him helping me out in the bath swirled in my head—I tried to shake them out. “Yeah, something like that. I mean if you plan on pouring it in the tub yourself.” I flirted back with him.

He reached over to open my car door, his hand brushing against mine. The touch of his skin made me want to kiss him again. But I was on business. I had to be professional.

“I’ll have to think about that and get back to you. I mean I *do* have your cell—just in case.”

Jared stood in the front high school parking lot watching me drive away. I watched him in my rear-view mirror. My heart was now beating so fast and hard I could see it thumping under my blouse.

His hands were on his hips as he watched me drive away. The conflict in him was becoming evident. He was interested in me too. But he had huge

trust issues, and I had a story to write. And no matter what my heart was starting to feel, I wouldn't let Mama or myself down.

As I drove away, my head was spinning. How did Jill fit into all this? Did she know the secret? All I could think of was that I needed to find Marti, the woman from the diner. She was literally my only clue, and I didn't even know if she really even was a clue. Maybe Jared really did have to pee, and I was reading too much into it.

I drove with the top down, the sun spending its final seconds in an orange glittery burst before it slipped into nightfall. I drove over to the Lakeview Café to meet Carrie and Georgie so we could work on the fundraiser. Maybe Georgie had learned something helpful from Jill, since hairdressers always double as a therapist.

Georgie was so different from me, actually we were all quite unique from each other. Carrie was tiny and blonde. I had my curly long red hair and stood about 5'3"—that was tall in my family, and Georgie had a shoulder-length golden brown mop of waves. But we all had the same eyes. Blue-green like the Gulf of Mexico. Our eyes were from the Bruce side.

I pulled into a space right in front of the salon. Georgie was locking up when she saw me. Instantly, she jumped up and ran over, wobbling in her high heels to hug me. Her funny run in those 4-inch heels made me laugh, her mop of hair bounced all the way in time with her bosom.

"Hey, Honey! My goodness you look so skinny. Ew! What the hell is that smell?" She had been in the Caribbean with Lathan, her new boyfriend. She always did manage to find the rich guys. It had been this way her whole life. So this was the first time I had seen her in the two weeks I had been home.

"Yes, well—I fell into a skunk's house last night and she showed me who's boss. I am so fed up with everybody smelling me."

"You look too skinny too. Don't they have decent food in Hotlanta?" That's what southerners like to call the big city of Atlanta.

We hugged and made our way next door to the café. The Lakeview Café was all coffee and sweets, a reporter's dream.

"Honey, how did it go? You look a mess," Carrie, always the honest one, so nicely pointed out. "And that smell... "

"I rode here with the top down and please, if one more person says anything about my stink, I swear! I bathed in tomato juice twice last night."

"Well, baby, it sure didn't do you any good. Now you smell like skunk stew. I have some ideas. Come home with me and we'll try it tonight."

"Great! Just don't make me bathe in any more food."

"You do look a little worn out," she continued. "Mama drivin' you up the wall?"

"No, not too much. I just finished an interview for the new column," I said sliding into the booth. "I'm just a little tired."

Before we could even order the sweet tea, I saw the door open. Marti walked in. My breath left my body. I wanted to race over to her, but it would

be like trying to chase a squirrel.

"What is it?" Georgie asked me, her eyes as round as quarters.

"Oh, I nearly hit that woman with my car the other day. I just wanted to apologize."

I stared at Marti. She was dressed in designer jeans, a white tank top and a long thin sweater, flowing to her thighs. She had a gold chain belt slung low around her hips. She certainly stood out.

My heart thumped faster, then rose in my throat. What do I do? I knew I had to act fast. I still had the little boy's picture in my purse. But I wanted to keep it to see if anyone knew him. I had no plan, but my legs got up and walked, and before I knew it, I was face to face with Marti, for the second time.

"Hey. Sorry to bother you. I'm the ..."

"Yes, I certainly remember you." She smiled weakly as she paid for her take-out.

The round woman behind the register glanced up over her round glasses, "Oh, is this the woman you were looking for the other day?" I had gone up and down Main Street asking about her, after I nearly hit her.

"You were looking for me, why?"

Oh no, now what do I say?

"I—uhm, I was looking for you that same day I nearly ran you over and I—uh—I—was just wondering if anybody knew you? I mean you didn't look too familiar and so I just assumed you were new."

"So? I think I told you I was just here visiting. I don't live here. I told you all that. Why were you looking for me?"

Oh, God. Help me. What do I say? I had to find out who she is, and what she means to Jared. The picture of the little boy. It was all I had.

"Oh, well I found something in the street after you left. It's a picture. I just wanted to return it to you. That was why I was looking for you. Just a minute, I'll go get it."

I turned to walk back to the booth where my sisters were sitting and grabbed my purse. "I'll fill y'all in in a second." I laid the picture down on the table and snapped a pic with my cell, just in case. I walked back over to her as I dug in the pocket of my purse where I had stuck the picture. "Here you go," I said as I handed her the picture.

I watched her face as she reached out toward the picture. Her face softened and a smile crept across her lips. She held it for a moment, like she hadn't looked at it in a long time.

"Your son?" I broke the moment, trying to pry a little.

"Yeah," she let a breath out. "But he's older now." She never looked up from the picture.

"Oh, well you sure look too young yourself to have a child much older than that," I assured her being as friendly as I could be.

She looked up at me and smiled a small smile. Her eyes were soft. She

looked sad, in a way.

"He's really cute" I pushed. "How old is he now?"

"Oh, he's nearly grown. Thank you again." She turned to walk out.

"Wanna come sit with us?" I was throwing out all I had.

"No, I have to get this stuff to my parents. They're waiting."

"Oh, who are they? My mother has lived here forever. I bet she knows them."

"Thanks again, I really have to go." She headed out the glass doors.

I heaved a huge sigh. I turned back to my sisters and sat down with them, filling them in over iced tea and some hearty sweets. Sugar. It was just what I needed.

"Well, I think you have some research to get done," Georgie offered as she took a bite of banana pudding.

"I know it, I need to know who she is, who are her parents, why is Jared running from her, what is he hiding, and I need to find out who are Nick Love's grandparents so I can interview them for the article—I need a genius with computers, that's what I need." Suddenly, I realized I knew one—one with severe asthma.

"And don't forget we need to finalize this fundraiser. I have already called the caterers and have ordered all the decorations today. Now we need to get all the yacht club folks in on this so I have bought an ad to go in the yacht club newsletter tomorrow."

"Aren't all those people at the club old?" Georgie asked, stuffing more pudding into her mouth.

"Excuse me," Carrie jumped back at her. "David and I are members."

"Well, I know you are, but you just like rubbing elbows with all that money," Georgie said without looking up. Maybe honesty ran in this family. On second thought, it seemed to be missing me. I would do almost anything to get close to Jared and learn what he's hiding. I had already told so many white lies and kept trying to gain people's trust when they should have none.

"When's the fundraiser?" I asked to lighten the growing tension. I mean Georgie did have a point. Carrie did like to rub shoulders with the old money of Cottonwood Cove. Charlie Cooper was pushing eighty years old, but Carrie and David had become regulars on his yacht rides around the bay. I expect he and his wife, Gertie, would be there for sure.

"Saturday night. We have just a few days to pull this off."

"I know you can do it. I'm here to help; just let me know.

"Me too," Georgie offered. "I can serve and I'll even ask Lathan if he can come help."

"Oh, goodie, I can't wait to have the Coppertone King show up. He's not much for work is he?"

"He is the son of one of the wealthiest families in Cottonwood Cove. I just thought you needed money, and you know, he sorta has it." Georgie was irritated.

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"Okay, you have a point," Carrie acknowledged.

"Ginny, you seem a million miles away."

"I just wanna know. I mean I need to get some answers."

"I know the schedule of the coach. I mean, at least I know he has a meeting with the Jaycees tonight. David is there right now."

"Right now?" Georgie put down her spoon, finally and glanced up.

"Yeah, now. So?"

"I was just thinking, we could learn a lot with a little snooping, you know?" Georgie was scheming.

"Oh, no you don't," Carrie demanded. "There's no way we're gonna do a repeat of the Scheme Team. We stayed in enough trouble when we were little. And you were always the ringleader. What is it about being the youngest? You have no fear or what? Maybe that part of the brain gets the short end of the stick." She sipped her tea and shook her head.

"Oh, c'mon Carrie, take a risk every once in a while!" Georgie demanded.

"I take risks," Carrie defended herself. "Sometimes I don't even floss. And one time I actually wore white after Labor Day."

"Oh, my God!" Georgie went back to her dessert.

"Wait a minute. I was there last night, and I did see a lot of pictures on the wall. Maybe we could just go peek," I suggested, a little more than excited.

"Well count me out. I will not go anywhere near a skunk!" Carrie was typically only concerned with appearances. And odors.

"Come on, we'll need a look-out." Georgie looked down and checked her watch. "And we better get goin'. I bet the meeting ends soon."

"The Jaycee meeting does end in about half an hour," she said, glancing at her pink-washed Michael Kors watch.

We left cash on the table for the check and a generous tip and headed out of The Lakeview Café like we had a party to get to. It might be even better than a party—if I could avoid the angry sprayer in the hydrangea bush and just get some answers. The Scheme Team was at it again, but this time, we weren't spying on the neighborhood wicked witch.





# Chapter Thirteen

“Come on,” I whispered. “We gotta hurry. Don’t y’all go near that bush over there.” I was at the top of the steps leading the way. “Unless you wanna reek for weeks.”

“I love this old house,” Georgie said peering into the left-hand far window. It was behind the porch swing. “I see some pictures but they look like just some old people.”

“What is it with you and old people?” Carrie asked from the bottom of the stairs. “You two have exactly five minutes and I’m leaving. We could get into a heapa trouble here, and I would make a mess of my life with David. I could never explain what I was doing snooping at the new coach’s house with my insane two sisters. David and I have carefully built what we have.”

“You could say you were trying to rescue us from a rabid skunk,” I offered.

“Ginny, get over here. I think I see something.” Georgie motioned to me.

I dashed across the porch and peeked into the window. Both Georgie and I were tippy toeing up to peer into the front window when headlights flashed a dreaded reflection on the glass, nearly blinding us.

“I’m done, get to the car now,” Carrie said as she ran for her car.

“Oh, my God, it’s him.” Georgie jumped off the side of the porch in her 4-inch heels, screeching in what sounded like pure pain as she landed. The car continued on to the back door at the end of the driveway behind the house. I stood still as it passed then ran down the stairs to the get-away car. Carrie, Georgie and I slammed the doors of Carrie’s BMW and sped off.

“My God, y’all are freaking lunatics. Remind me to never go along with y’all again. I have a reputation and this kind of thing just cannot happen to me.” Carrie pressed the accelerator a little harder.

“We’re going home to my house right now. I have to beat David there or he’ll ask too many questions, and I am a bad liar.”

"Get Ginny to lie for you. She's the best liar of the bunch!"

"Why thank you, honey, nothing says I've missed you like being called a liar." I smirked.

"Seriously, Ginny, I need you to get upstairs and stripped immediately. That stench is making me totally nauseous! We gotta fix that awful aroma problem you've got. We can tell David we've been here working on the de-skunking all evening."

"If you put any food on me I'm heading straight back out," I warned her.

"You'll have to walk. Your car's at The Hair Port.

"Shit! Okay, but please don't make me smell like a skunk soup and salad bar."

We all ran upstairs and I threw my clothes on the floor—Carrie would have had a full-out hissy fit if I had laid the skunk clothes on her king-sized pale turquoise duvet.

"Get the peanut butter," she ordered Georgie.

"What the hell? I told you not to make me a soup or a salad."

"I have never heard of peanut butter soup or a peanut butter salad. Go Georgie, we got work to do."

Georgie sprinted to the kitchen, limping all the way, her now-discarded heels on the white carpet of Carrie's master suite. She hopped down the stairs and was back in a jiffy.

"Here you go," Georgie huffed as she handed the ginormous jar of peanut butter to Carrie. "Are you expecting a shortage of peanut butter or something?"

"No, but you never know when we're gonna be hit by a tornado and this is the every-food. A human can survive forever as long as they have peanut butter."

"Don't tell me you have a tornado survivor kit?" Georgie asked sarcastically.

"Of course she does." I winked as Carrie slathered me in peanut butter. "Probably one for each of us." She dabbed my arms and covered my thighs. I glanced up at Georgie. Her mouth was dropped open, stunned at what was happening in Carrie's bathroom. She was frozen in a stare just as we heard David arrive home downstairs.

"Hey, Honey, I'm home."

"Oh God, please tell him not to come up here. I am butt-naked covered in peanut butter. No one would ever understand—please," I begged. "He'll think I'm trying to make some weird porno movie or something."

"Georgie, take care of that. Tell him I'll be right down and explain what happened to Ginny."

Just then their wild-as-a-pig Pomeranian came bounding up the stairs at full speed and started barking like a junkyard watchdog. She was like a Pomeranian on steroids and could jump like a wild rabbit.

"No! No! Please get this nut dog off me," I yelled. "She's trying to attack

me.”

“Georgie broke out in laughter. “Hahahahahahaha, that dog just loves peanut butter. Carrie feeds it to her as a snack.”

“No! She’s trying to lick me, please help me.” I was uncontrollable. I ran down the stairs, that little maniac chasing my peanut-butter-covered ass all the way down the curving banister.

“She can’t understand why you’re wearin’ her snack,” Georgie said as she continued to laugh at me. I tripped down the bottom of the stairs and fell straight into David’s arms. He was dressed in Armani and now my naked body was smashed up against him and his fancy lawyer suit.

“What in the name of God is going on here?” David demanded as he stood, stunned, at the bottom of his stairs.

I opened my mouth, but no explanation popped out as to how his perfectly ordered life had de-evolved into having his naked sister-in-law slathered in peanut butter run down his stairs while being chased by his designer dog.

“Oh, honey, I can explain everything,” Carrie said calmly.

“And that smell.” David had one hand splayed out in front of him as if to block me from his sight and the other now covered his nose. “Has that skunk been under the house again?”

“No, that smell is Ginny. She got sprayed and I’m tryin’ everything I know to help her.”

Just then I heard my cell phone from my purse upstairs. I took off running—that God-forsaken mutt chasing my naked butt all the way back up the stairs. I grabbed it just before it went to voice-mail. I didn’t even get to look at the caller ID.

“Hello?” I said totally out of breath, the dog still barking and jumping up and licking my legs.

“Miss Hunnicutt?”

“Yes?” I didn’t recognize the sound of the voice right away. He was young, like a teenager.

“It’s Nick Love. I have a question for you.”

“Okay shoot,” I said trying to pretend I wasn’t really a life-sized doggy treat.

“I was wondering if you’d like to meet my grandparents? They are so proud of me and they said they’d love to meet you.”

“Oh, absolutely,” I was amazed I could speak at all.

“Okay, they said to come by the Catfish Shack tomorrow at 5 and they’d get supper.”

“Great, see y’all then.” I hung up, amazed by my change in fortune. Something had gone right today. And I was totally licked clean. I sure hope Nick’s grandparents like me as much as this damn dog.





# Chapter Fourteen

I was a nervous wreck as I drove to the little diner the next afternoon. I had made sure I had all my questions ready to go. My cell rang in my purse and I grabbed it, pulling over at the corner of Main Street. It was nearly 5pm. *Oh no*, I thought. It was Nick. I hoped he wasn't cancelling.

"Hey Nick, y'all waitin' on me?"

"Well, my grandmother was wondering if you'd be able to come out to our house instead of the diner. She forgot and made us supper. When I got home I reminded them, but they were wondering if you'd mind just stopping by over here?"

Oh, my gosh! This was music to my ears. A person's home will tell such a deeper story. This was a jackpot! "No problem, give me the address."

I shoved my phone back inside my purse and turned the opposite way and headed out toward Lakeview Park then turned at the corner of Camelia Street and Lee Highway. The wedding cottage sat there sweetly in the late afternoon sun, like a bride waiting for her dreams to come true. Pink and red rose bushes surrounded the gazebo. It sat right outside the wedding chapel at Lakeview Park. Carrie had gotten married there a few years ago. I recalled my own childhood dreams of a princess wedding. I had always wanted it right there.

I pulled into the drive at the address on Lee Highway. This road led out to Interstate 59, which was the route most took to either Birmingham or Tuscaloosa. It was a small older house but looked well kept. I made my way up the front porch steps and knocked on the old screened door.

"Hey, so glad you could make it," Nick said opening the door.

Inside the small outdated rooms were cluttered stacks of magazines and newspapers. I entered and was escorted straight to the dining room table set off to the left in a small room that was just off the kitchen. A short small woman stood at the stove and just as she saw me she stopped stirring and

walked over to Nick and me.

"Granny, I'd like you to meet Miss Ginny Hunnicutt. She's doing the story on me for the Chatterbox." Nick was adorable.

"Nice to meet you," the woman said as she wiped her hands on her old faded apron before she reached out to shake my hand.

"Granny's name is Marlene Love and this is my Granddad, Nevin." Nick did the honors of finishing the introductions.

How'd ya do?" Nevin said. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Y'all sit, supper's ready." Marlene went back to work at the stove stirring the potatoes one last time. Nick and Nevin helped her bring the food to the table, and we all sat down.

Pictures of Nick playing football hung on the wall. We chatted—mostly small talk as we ate a country supper, complete with homemade biscuits, mashed potatoes, black-eyed peas and greens. The fried catfish was spectacular.

"Nick, I see now why you're so healthy. Miss Marlene sure does feed you well if you eat like this all the time." I smiled and made small talk.

"Oh, she cooks like this most days. It is such a habit, that's how she forgot about the Catfish Shack." Nevin laughed as he took a bit of catfish.

I had so many questions swirling in my head, and these people seemed as genuine as the Alabama sun. I wanted to know about Nick's life, and how they had raised such a fine young man in their advanced years.

After dinner and dessert of homemade peach cobbler, we all moved into the family room where I had first come inside. I sat down in an old blue velveteen-covered recliner near the door and they all sat down on the nearby matching couch.

"So tell me all about Nick. What was he like as a little boy?"

"Oh, he was just the cutest thing," Marlene answered first. "But he had a football in his hand seems like from the minute he got here."

"Yeah, that boy was born with a ball in his hand, that's for sure," Nevin added.

"Let's start from the beginning," I pushed just a little. "How did you happen to raise Nick? He told me his mom works out of town."

"Well, she does. Most of time she is out in California. She does call and visit once in a while but when she's home she does like to stay out of the spotlight. We're not originally from here but we moved here when Nick was about thirteen years old from up North. The rest of our family is nearby so we knew that would be important for him, to grow up around some family," Marlene explained.

"She had Nick when she was real young so we decided to raise him till she got settled. Thing is, she still ain't settled. Still tryin' to be an actress," Marlene divulged. Nevin shook his head and looked disappointed.

"What about your dad, Nick. Where's he?"

"I never knew him. My mom said he didn't even know about me. She ran

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away to have me and decided not to tell him, so we have no idea who or even where he is. He doesn't know he has a son. She told me that herself my whole life."

"Yeah, she never even told us who the daddy was, either." Nevin shook his head.

I suddenly felt so sad for Nick. "Well, I'll tell you what. They are missing out on raising a great kid." I smiled and put my arm around him.

"It's really okay. I mean this is what's normal for me. I wouldn't trade it for anything." Nick reached over and squeezed his grandmother's hand.

"Would you like to see Nick's baby pictures? I have an album." Marlene was so excited she jumped up and trotted to the hallway before I could even answer. She returned with a tattered photo album stuffed full of yellowed clippings. I was anxious to get a peek.

I began to flip through the pages, Nick as a tiny baby, then came the toddler pictures, always with a football, just like Nevin had said. I kept paging through the photos, coming upon his cute little school pictures. Then I stopped cold. My breath left my body completely as I pulled out a precious 5x7 picture of Nick, about eight years old. It was the exact same picture that I returned to Marti in the café. Oh, my God. My head was spinning. Marti—sounded like Marlene. Sudden nausea took me over. My head was putting together pieces faster than I could process anything.

Marti, the mysterious woman in white, the woman I almost killed was Nick's mother? I couldn't believe my eyes. Then I saw Nick's birth announcement. Marlene had taped a picture of a young Marti with baby Nick in her arms to the newspaper clipping. She was gorgeous, about eighteen. She gave him her own last name, handed him to her parents and headed west to chase her dreams.

Then my heart sped up even faster. Could it be? Jared had acted so weird when he saw her that first day I met him in the Catfish Shack. He didn't want her to see him. It couldn't be—it's so ridiculous—far-fetched. Could Jared's secret be that he's Nick's dad? Why was he hiding? Why wouldn't he tell his own son? Why didn't he want Marti to see him that day in the diner? Did she even know he had just taken the coaching job at the high school? Why all the secrets? Nothing would do but I had to know everything now. I was invested. I was sitting on top of a gold mine—or a volcano. But how could I find out any more? Jared had built a fortress around himself.

I had to be sure before I broke the story. I knew this would, in a single mind-blowing headline, save The Chatterbox and save my career. A big time award-winning former Alabama quarterback hides out in Cottonwood Cove, Alabama, mentoring his hidden son to football greatness. This will make me famous. If this was all I ever needed for my career, why did I suddenly feel like I was gonna throw up?



# Chapter Fifteen

I left the house with hugs and a heart-felt thank you to both Marlene and Nevin. They were the salt of the earth type of folks. Just good and solid and simple. Nick was a lucky kid to have them. I was fixin' to burst with all this news. I sat in my car staring at the cell-phone picture I had snapped of the wallet photo I had taken before I gave it to Marti. My heart raced as I looked at the precious little boy in that picture. What if I held his life of questions in my head?

I made the short drive back to the center of town. I needed to tell somebody. I wanted to get closer to Jared, oh for several reasons, but so I could get my answers. In my gut I felt he was protecting Nick and not himself. He absolutely didn't come across as selfish.

I knew I better not tell Mama—news like this would be hard to keep inside. She might as well buy a girdle and wear it over her whole entire face if I told her.

No, I had to go to my therapists, my sisters. It was after 7 pm so I knew Carrie would be home. I drove into The Highlands. Her house was dark as I drove by. Not home. I called her cell, but no answer.

I kept driving, trying to organize my thoughts. I knew what I knew. I felt it in my gut. Friday night was right around the corner and I had to get this column ready to go. Could I keep this secret till then? I had to check all my facts of course. I knew eventually I'd have to confront Jared too. I couldn't just blow his life up without him knowing. Plus, most importantly, Nick was involved and I suddenly felt so protective of him.

I was sitting on a bombshell. But there was nothing I could do but keep it all to myself until I got at least one column out in the paper. I was feeling that sick feeling again stirring in the pit of my stomach. How could I do this to either of them? I drove by Jared's house, like a spy. I stopped across the street and turned off my lights and just watched. The silence ticked by, only



my thumping heart could be heard. I had to think. Just then my cell rang. Georgie.

"Hey, Georgie what's goin' on?"

"Just seeing how it all went today."

How much do I tell her? "Oh very interesting, I got a lot of good stuff for the column." I decided to stay vague for the moment. Georgie was a very young twenty-seven years old—a little full of herself. But I needed to tell someone. Someone had to help me think.

"And?" she asked.

"And what?"

"Honey, you think you're gonna hide anything from me? I know the sound of your voice. There's a lot more that you are just dying to say. So spill."

"I can't on the phone. Meet me at Topsy's in ten minutes and I'll tell you. You have to swear on all those high heels and everything you love that you will not say a word."

"Ooooh, sounds delicious. Can't wait to hear it all. See ya in a few."

Just as I reached over to stick my phone back in my purse, I glanced up to see the front room light flick on in Jared's house. I sat still for a minute watching him. His gorgeous build, and dark hair evident even from my car. I was sad for him now. My heart ached for him. Maybe he just found out he was Nick's dad, and he didn't want to bombard him. I didn't know but whatever the story, I wanted it. My cell rang again. I grabbed it from my purse—a number I didn't recognize.

"Hello, this is Ginny," I answered.

"What are you doing outside my house?" A baritone voice with a sexy southern drawl asked. I peeked up, my throat suddenly closed, to see Jared's large silhouette standing in his front window, his left hand on his hip, phone to his ear. He was looking right at me. I couldn't tell if he was angry, or sarcastic.

"Oh, hi, I'm—uhm, I was just checking my GPS. I seem to be lost." I tried to play coy but I knew he could see through me. Somehow he had softened since I backed off with the personal questions. But now, with what I think I know, what would he be like? And that was just it, it was all speculation but all the puzzle pieces did seem to fit.

"Right. Lost as in looking for your pet skunk?"

"Haha, very funny."

"I heard you were interviewing Nick's family—how'd that go?"

Oh my, lord, what the hell do I say? I choked, literally.

"You okay? That seriously wasn't a trick question," he flirted.

"No, I'm sorry, something just tickled my throat," I explained. It was more like something had slashed my throat. Oh God, I couldn't say anything. I was walking on hot coals, through a fire with gasoline sprinkled on me...help me, I wanted to scream.

"Why don't you come on inside? I think that might be what you were after

in the first place. Maybe I can give you a few quotes for the column.”

Oh my I so wanted to get inside—on so many delicious levels. The hell with Georgie. We’d catch up later. But I had to promise myself to keep quiet and play it all close to the vest. I looked up into Jared’s front window, and Honey; I knew I was staring at everything I needed. I mean everything I needed for this story—ahem. Now if only I could keep my mouth shut.



# Chapter Sixteen

“Can I help you find your way out of the forest, little girl?” He teased me as he held the door open for me, that sexy dimple inviting me inside.

“Only if you aren’t the big bad wolf,” I flirted back.

“Maybe I am.” The door clicked shut behind me and now I knew there was no turning back. I was in the wolf’s lair. And I was heated from my red curls to my polished pink toes with excitement. Excitement for what I was hoping would happen.

His home was lovely and warm. The aroma of cinnamon tickled my nose as I placed my purse down on the credenza by the door. Jared had his bar open; Makers Mark sat on the ledge in full view, fresh ice cubes in the ice bucket. He was a southern boy in his soul. Fire crackled in the fireplace, creating a shadow dance of amber light along the mocha walls of the front room. It was late September and the nights were just starting to cool off. The cozy place shimmered in honey-hued colors up and down the mantle. I was instantly relaxed; at ease as the nerves and anxiety released.

“Can I get you a drink? Or do you have someplace to be? I mean according to you, you were on your way somewhere before you got, uhm—lost.” He grabbed a glass, as if he knew I would never voluntarily leave.

“Sure, but I need to text my sister. She was, uhm, was waiting on me to call her back and tell her I had found my way.”

“Have you?”

“Huh?”

“Have you found your way?”

God, I wanted to feel his huge arms around me. Seriously, he was the hottest man I had ever laid eyes on—and somehow, now that I knew he had a son, a protégé, he was even hotter. I knew he must be protecting Nick. That must be the sadness I thought I had detected. It had to be. Why else would a man like Jared settle in Cottonwood Cove? Nick had even said that his mom

had never told his dad, and so maybe Jared didn't even *know* about Nick.

"I think maybe I have—found my way—unless this is the home of the wolf dressed as a sexy former football star."

I knew that I was supposed to be on assignment—I needed to fill in the gaps of his past, but he made me dizzy and I just wanted to know what it would feel like to be next to him, feeling his hard-muscled frame against me. I was falling and it was becoming impossible to resist him.

He continued stirring a drink and clanking ice cubes into the highball glasses.

"So, what's your poison?" He turned with a grin to ask me, just like he asked me that first night in the bar.

"I'll have whatever you're having," I said not caring what that was.

"If you say so," he said looking at me with his dark heavy eyebrows arched.

He poured me some of the dark golden liquid over ice and handed it to me in a highball glass. I took it from him and decided not to nosey around, which is my usual way. Instead I sat down on the dark butterscotch-tanned leather couch in front of the fire. As soon as I sat, Jared slid in next to me, his hard big thigh brushing my knee, his hips touching mine.

"Listen, I wanna thank you for not pushing it yesterday," he said.

"No problem. You gave me my boundaries and I made a promise. I respect you, even if you don't think I do."

"Okay, I had that comin', but I just want my private life kept private, my past is in the past—and I have a right to keep it there and keep the focus on my players."

*Well, you may wanna keep it there but it has crawled out to greet me, today.* I knew I better not say a word but my head was churning with everything I had learned.

"Of course," I agreed, "I understand completely. I have secrets of my own I'd never wanna share. So I totally get it. Private is private and professional is professional." I took a sip of my whisky and coughed.

Jared laughed. "You said you wanted what I was having."

"I know, I'm fine—just tickled my throat a bit," I said, my throat still stinging. I took another sip. Better this time.

"So you have secrets too?" he teased. "Personal? Career-related? I thought you already told me everything."

"Oh, no—you are asking me private things, oh no, my walls may go up—you have certainly crossed the line, buddy!" I played back.

He had a fun, playful, sexy nature that I found so irresistible.

Jared finished his drink. This was at least his second, since I'd seen him finish the drink he had in his hand when he'd been watching me from the window. He was loose.

"Okay, I had that comin' too," he said as he stood to make himself another drink.

"Can I get you another?" he offered with a grin.



## The Perfect Score

What the hell, I decided. He looked too good to leave and one more drink and he might just spill his whole life story. "Sure, I'd love one." I smiled. His cornflower blue eyes heated my body as I took the glass from his huge hands, my fingers brushing his, sending a tingle shooting through me.

"Nick is so great he just has it all," I said trying to get my quote. Oh, who the hell was I kidding? I could take any number of the things he told me the first day I met him when he told me all about his young star. I had all the quotes I needed.

"Oh, yes, you did need a quote. Let me think."

He brought the drinks back and scooped next to me, that body so hot I had fantasies running through my mind. I had no idea what he was saying. The drinks had me fuzzy as I sipped my second much faster. Nerves. I knew I was fixin' to do something I shouldn't. But I couldn't feel my reporter self any more. She had slipped away.

Jared set his drink down on the dark wooden weather-beaten coffee table and then draped his arm across the back of the couch, me underneath his protective shelter. He looked deeply at me, inches from my face, clearly feeling the alcohol—his end-of-the-day whiskers darkening his rugged sweet face. I was totally lost in his masculine beauty, in his strength, his scent. Just all of him. I took a last gulp of my drink to try to distract myself and felt a drop of the melting ice cubes on my top lip.

"Here let me get that," he offered, his soft fingertips slipping slowly over my lips. Jared leaned over closer and closer—until he gently rested his lips on mine. He was slow and deliberate. But I knew he was testing the waters. I let him dive in, his lips so delicious I was hungry for more. I kissed him back, nibbling his lower lip, him tickling mine with his tongue.

"There I think I got that drop. Maybe I need to just make sure."

I tilted my head toward the back of the couch, as he pressed his strong hard arms under me and around the small of my back and pulled me into him. He slid the tip of his thumb along my jaw-line, dropping his perfect hands down my neck and beneath my open collar. Before I knew it, I felt his tongue slip down just under my ear, tasting me as he went. My body relaxed into him.

God, I never wanted any man like I wanted him. That was just it. Jared was a man. I don't think I had been with a real man ever before Jared. There was a way about him, big and mysterious, all six feet three inches of him and hard muscles on top of hard muscles. But it was more than just physical for me.

He seemed lonely and hungry. I could feel it. He'd been in town since July so close to his son but with his enormous secret trapped deep inside.

I found myself wanting to comfort him—not confront him.

"Oh, yeah, you still need that quote," he mumbled between licks and nibbles and delicate sucking.

"Oh, well—I don't seem to have my note pad." I bit his lip gently, my tongue rolling into his mouth. He pulled me down positioning me beneath

him. His weight on me made me feel so safe—so small, as he began to devour me for what I hoped would turn into hours. I felt him unbutton my pants and slip them down over my hips. I wiggled out of them fast and kicked them off to the hardwood floor below. He smiled at my eagerness, but when I reached for his belt buckle, he was there first, raising his body long enough to undo his belt and slide his jeans off, where they joined mine on the floor.

His hands explored every inch of me, slipping between my thighs then sliding over my belly and back down between my legs again, each moment his mouth tasting my skin as he became familiar with the rise and fall of my body.

He was an incredibly gentle, careful lover, looking into my eyes with each move—with each pulse of his hips, in a rhythm with mine. My feelings for him grew with each kiss. He unbuttoned my blouse, button by button, kissing each inch he exposed. I sighed against his lips, as my hands did some exploring of their own underneath his shirt.

His large hard-muscled thighs slid against mine. His hands reached beneath me and cupped my ass, pulling me closer with intense desire.

No one had ever made love to me like this so slowly and deliberately. I felt cherished. I felt desired, not just physically but me, all of me. It was in the intensity of his gaze and expression as he explored my body so completely, inch by inch.

I had never really felt something as real as this. It was a deep connection. Not just attraction anymore. An emotional connection had been created as I tried to figure him out. I was getting to know this man from another perspective. Finding out all I had at Nick's house had changed everything for me. Now, the man I was making love to had found his way into my heart.

I whispered his name and pulled off his shirt, wanting to feel his heated skin against mine. My fingers tangled in his hair as he unhooked my bra, and I encouraged him to touch me everywhere. My eyes closed as he found every sensitive spot, and I pulled him more tightly against me, wanting to feel as close physically as I was feeling emotionally.

I wanted to know his entire story, not to expose him, but to protect him. Comfort him. Help him to find a way to Nick. My thoughts of my career, even saving the newspaper floated away as I fell into the sensual abyss of making love to him. Every sense I had was awakened with his touch, his breath on my skin, his gorgeous body on mine, and the feel of his weight on me. I had never been cared for so gently—him making sure I was comfortable and feeling good the whole time he made love to me. His emotions simmering just right under the surface—I could feel the barriers between us breaking down. No more walls, I promised myself as I harbored a hidden hope that as we spent hours devouring each other, he wouldn't regret this in the morning.

# Chapter Seventeen

The early morning light tickled my eyelids, a glimmer dancing in from windows I didn't fully recognize. Somehow during the night I had slipped into Jared's white oxford button-down, sans panties. It was so big on me, grazing my knees. I was still on the couch, under a light cotton cream-colored blanket. Jared must have covered me up—and dressed me sometime during the afterglow, but I didn't remember that part. Everything else was vividly etched in my memory.

It was early, and Jared was already up and moving around in the kitchen, the cinnamon bread he had made the night before, now warming in the oven. I fought everything in me to pull the blanket up and tuck it under my chin. The leather couch was so warm and soft, that it cradled me in comfort. I didn't want to leave. I was the most relaxed I had ever been, satisfied on every level. Instead of closing my eyes again, I stretched and kicked my cover off and wobbled to the kitchen.

"Hey, sleeping beauty. Got time for a bite?" His voice full of morning, the tones even deeper than usual.

"I seem to remember I might have had a bite last night." I smiled and slithered my arms around his waist from behind and nuzzled my face into the back of his tee shirt, his muscular back full of deep crevices to hide my morning face. I was a little scared he might say last night was a mistake; that we had been effected by the whisky and that our kissing had gone too far. Jared turned to face me. He seemed so much taller, me in my bare feet and his size towering over me. I felt small and a tad embarrassed.

Jared seemed okay, maybe a little awkward. Maybe he wasn't so sure how I was gonna feel.

"I hope you're okay about last night," he finally said into my curling out-of-control hair. "When I asked you to come in last night, what happened was not my intention."

"Oh, really, said the big bad wolf," I flirted, playing with him.

He smiled at me.

He looked down at me and kissed my forehead.

What was I doing? I really was sleeping with the wolf—elusive, mysterious. The thought of everything I suspected bubbled up in my throat and strangled my words. I wanted so badly to connect with him on a deeper level—with the truth, but he was afraid. And why wouldn't he be? I was the reporter. I'd set out to expose his secret and reboot my career with it.

It hit me that really I was the big bad wolf. I couldn't quite meet his eyes. I had to decide what to do. The game was coming up soon, and the very next night we'd have the fundraiser. I was scheduled to introduce Nick as Chatterbox's first One To Watch. I felt claustrophobic, like all the secrets I was keeping from him about all that I suspected would eventually choke me. I wanted to run, but I wanted to stay, all in the same moment, and the two conflicting desires held me immobilized.

"I made some bread. Let's have that and some O.J. Then I gotta get to work." He put everything on the round wooden breakfast table and we both sat down.

I looked at him for any sign of how he really felt. He wasn't as transparent as I'm sure I must have been to him.

"Yeah, me too, I have a lot to do today. And as far as last night," I had to get my feelings out there, "I was just fine with your lack of intentions. I kinda like how we just rolled with it." I smiled and bit into the cinnamon bread.

"Yeah, I'd say the rolling was pretty nice."

"Hey, by the way, Nick mentioned you were talking to his grandparents yesterday after practice—How'd it go?" He reached over, grabbing his orange juice and took a swig.

My heart raced, Should I tell him? I was dying inside. I had just made love with him. I was falling for him. I knew everything and I loved him even more for all that I knew. I was terrified, but I had to let him know.

"Uhm, it went really well. Marlene and Nevin are just the salt of the Earth. Uhm, yeah, they even showed me Nick's baby album." I just threw it out there—waiting to see if there was an explosion.

"Really?" He suddenly seemed nervous. "What all did you find out?" Jared chewed faster and didn't look up. He looked anxious all of a sudden. The air instantly changed—becoming thick and heavy and suffocating.

"Nick was a cutie-pie, that's for sure."

"Did you see anything else—I mean, uhm, anything you could use for the article?"

"Well, not that I could really use but some of it did give me some insight into who he is and what he comes from. He's a great kid," I added putting my fork down.

I was so nervous I threw my O.J. back like it was a shot of scotch. I wished it were.



## The Perfect Score

"What else did you see?"

"Well, I saw baby pictures. Uhm, I saw a birth announcement too."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I saw him with his mom." I swallowed so hard I felt like I had swallowed my tongue—no such luck.

"Yeah?" He now wouldn't look up at me.

He wasn't chewing anymore. Just frozen, with his eyes cast downward to the table. He didn't utter a sound.

"Jared." I didn't know how to say the next part. "She looked just like that lady that came into the Catfish Shack when we met there."

Still silence.

"You know the one that came in when you jumped up to go to the bathroom? I know you saw her."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean." Finally he broke his silence.

He looked over to me from the other side of the table, his beautiful blue eyes like laser beams cutting me in half. I could feel the wall around him, tall, impenetrable. Should I push it? Subtle has never been in my playbook. Keeping my mouth shut isn't either. I took a deep breath and dove in.

"I saw you when she came in. You looked startled. Then you left the room. I know all about her, Jared. I know she was from Nashville, and I saw your high school football picture in your office the other day, the North Nashville High School Titans. Marlene and Nevin had pictures of Marti in her cheerleader outfit. I know Nick's yours. I know that's what you've been hiding."

My heart was breaking as tears filled my eyes and slipped down my face. I winced as he stared at me, my throat so dry it was choking me. But the honesty felt good. It was out there now. And no matter what happened with me and Jared or me and my career this was now about Nick, a talented upstanding seventeen-year-old boy who was doing all he could to reach his dreams, and the two old people who stood behind him everyday with hopes and dreams for him motivating their every breath. His whole life was right in front of him. How could I ruin that?

Jared pushed back from the table slowly. "I think you need to go now," he said in a slow and steady voice.

The morning's playfulness had drained from him. He was sullen and serious. He stood and walked to the sink and didn't look at me.

"You think you know everything. Really you just assume. You don't know anything at all about me. Nothing. Maybe I was hoping I could trust you, but you've proven my first instinct was a bull's-eye. You're nosy. You make assumptions, and then you run with them, not caring who you might hurt. You know none of these things to be a fact, Ginny. If you print one word I'll be the one that owns that silly paper of yours."

"Hey, that's my mom's life-blood," I defended the paper automatically, each one of his cold words hit me like buckshot. "It's been in my family for



generations. I'm trying to make an honest living and help my mom. You're the one in trouble—you're the one living a lie! You know your son has no idea even who his dad is? He's been wondering his whole life why he wasn't important enough for either of his parents to stick around and raise him!"

Oh no, I'd gone too far. Jared turned to me, his eyes narrowed and angry.

"Get out now. I don't want you anywhere near the school. I will have security restrain you if I have to. All you were ever out to do was try to dig up some hopefully sordid story so you could sell a few newspapers and pat yourself on the back about how clever you are, not caring that other people's lives are affected. Proud of yourself now? Gonna run home to your mama and celebrate some imagined big scoop? Just get out. I'd better never see you again unless you're walking in a different direction."

He threw a dishtowel down onto the countertop in a fury and walked at a fast clip past me, brushing against me with his arm. "Get dressed! Get out."

"Jared, please, that's not true." I ran after him. "I care about you, I do. I care about Nick. Please, just listen to me."

He slammed his bedroom door in my face.

"I have to cover the game tonight. I have to—Nick's counting on me. Please, I promise I'm not gonna write about anything personal."

The silence screamed at me from behind the door. "Please. I wasn't going to print that. I wasn't."

Tears fell as I continued to beg, my face pressed against his door. I waited, but no response. Wiping my face with shaky fingers, I walked over to the aftermath of clothes, a pile of reminders of the passion we had just shared hours earlier. I sifted through and retrieved my pants, lacy lavender undies, and bra. I grabbed my purse and slipped out the front door, barefoot and quickly trotted across the street to my car.

Once inside the safety of my own space I cried as hard as I had ever cried—sobbing and gasping for breath. Some shred of pride made me finally stick the keys into the ignition since I didn't want him to catch me having a breakdown in front of his house. I turned the key and caught a glimpse of my face in the rearview mirror. Wow, I thought. What have I just done? I was a disaster. My mascara streaked and smeared under my eyes, my knotted messy frizz hung down over my face in all the wrong places. Bloodshot eyes stared back at me. And beneath them, I could see the enormous ache in my soul. The ache so palpable the pain hung all around me in the misty sunrise.

I leaned forward and rested my head on my steering wheel. The feeling of being alone swallowed me. How in the world could I ever fix this? The future of the paper, my own future, and the real fact that I was now emotionally involved made this beyond fixing. And now Jared wouldn't have any more to do with me. But I still wanted to know one thing—why had he never told Nick who he was?

# Chapter Eighteen

I drove home, embarrassed and sad. Slipping into my room, I slid beneath the covers and slept. Mama left me alone—probably instinct. I filled her in on all the details, when I woke. She sat back in her chair, folded her arms over her belly and sighed.

“Poor man,” she finally responded. “I just wonder why he never told Nick. And, even if it would save the paper, we could never expose this. It’s between Nick and Jared and Nick should never ever find this out through the press. So there goes the big story.” She sighed again and shook her head as she got up and went to the stove to pour herself some more coffee.

“Don’t worry, Mama, we’re having the fundraiser tomorrow night. All the old money in Cottonwood Cove will be there.”

“Old money is hard to pry from old half-dead hands,” she said sadly.

“Somehow I have to cover the game tonight,” I said, hoping Jared had just been speaking in anger and wouldn’t really ban me from the game. “I’m taking Georgie since she’s got the new high-powered camera. Her pictures are amazing, and I think she’ll be great at it.”

I pushed back in my chair with my bare tiptoes and walked over and hugged Mama. She looked so disappointed, as if now that the big story to save the paper was gone, the paper would be too. I knew better. I had to pull myself together and get cleaned up for tonight. It would be a Friday night lights for the record books.

\* \* \*

I decided to fill Georgie in. I’d been supposed to see her last night when I got seriously distracted. I picked her up and we drove to the high school. I prayed Jared would let me do my job without interruption. I wanted to interview Nick afterwards, too.

I called Carrie, too, to make sure we were good to go for tomorrow night.

“We are in good shape,” she reported. “I did an email blast. I’ve had about

a ninety percent confirmation. It's gonna be great." Carrie was driving. She had been trying to get pregnant for the last few months, and she was on her way to the doctor for a check-up to make sure she was okay.

My fingers were crossed for her, but I needed her to be focused on the game tonight, and then the fundraiser. The landlords were dropping the hammer in just a week, so the money we raised would have to be enough. But if anyone could multi-task, Carrie was the one.

Georgie and I pulled around to the back of the school. The sun had set and the evening haze blanketed the sky in a canopy of periwinkle and lavender. The glimmer of a few twinkling stars just peeking out for their nightly show.

I shifted the car into park.

"Ready?" I looked over at Georgie. "We got a big night ahead. Mama's decided to run this new column as a full feature in the morning on the cover of the paper. The picture'll be super important."

"What are you gonna say to Jared? I mean I know you'll see him. You two shared something last night and from the way you talked, you like this guy—a lot."

"I do, but he's done with me. He doesn't trust me. That kinda ends it, ya know?"

"Listen to me, Virginia, Don't you give up on love. I've seen you do it a hundred times. It's just your way. It gets messy, and you run. Don't do it this time. I can name seven guys you dropped in the last few years. You're always the one who runs."

"Not this time. I would have stayed. He threw me out, remember?"

"Yeah, but that was knee-jerk, you know? You threatened his privacy, broke through the walls without him even knowing you had a hammer. He was blindsided by you. It can be kinda your way to do that. Even though I know you don't mean to."

I drew in a deep breath. I stared at Georgie, more intuitive than I had ever given her credit for. The school itself was just outside her window of the car. The memories flooded me as I realized over a lifetime of relationships, maybe she was right. I could tend to scare people off.

"I'll see how it goes tonight. You're right though; Jared is different. Somehow he just is, and I want more with him. I don't want him to put those walls back up. I bet he won't talk to me, but I'll try. C'mon. Let's go." I smiled at her and she reached over and patted my hand, smiling reassuringly back at me.

Just as we opened the car doors, the field lights clicked on and I heard the marching band begin to play the fight song. It was the Friday night lights of my teenage years all over again. The last time I'd been here had been the final game of my senior year. Robby Hanover was a wide receiver just like Nick Love. I was a cheerleader. That final game our senior year, Robby made the winning touchdown. The night that followed was one I would remember for

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the rest of my life. At seventeen and coming from the family I came from, sex was not part of the plan, but we spent the night making out to Faith Hill's *Breathe* and LeAnn Rimes's *I Need You*.

Those songs now played in my head as I looked around at the stadium. Lord, the memories were swarming me and filling every space of my head. This was the time of Nick's life. I could remember just what it felt like to be seventeen and on top of the world. It was surreal that I was now covering the game, as an adult, like I had grown up and was right where I was supposed to be.

Georgie and I made our way to the field, our spiked heels sinking into the damp Alabama earth.

"I'm gonna go ahead and see if I can get a quote from Nick before the game," I said as we approached the brightly lit field.

"No problem, I'll start getting shots and set up near the locker room so I can get them all running out."

"Great idea. I'll meet you in twenty minutes near the entrance. That way we can work side by side—I'll tell you what I need."

Georgie nodded. "Good luck. I hope Jared's calmed down a bit."

I smiled even though I felt nervous and headed down towards the locker room. I immediately spied Jared standing in the back, studying papers probably filled with plays for the game that night. My stomach flipped. He was so handsome. The click of my heels on the stairs startled him, and he glanced up. I stopped as he looked at me then kept moving down the stairs. It was an awkward ugly silence. Jared looked back down at his playbook without saying a word.

I sat down on a bench waiting for Nick to arrive. It was like a huge loud clock ticking over my head as the seconds crept and crawled slowly by. I had to say something. Of course I did.

"Jared, please don't be mad at me."

He looked at the playbook and scowled.

"Really," I continued. "I never meant to expose anything." Well, I had to be completely honest if I wanted him to trust me, didn't I? "Well, I wanted to until I knew what your secret was. But I'd never do that to Nick. I won't. I mean nothing will be in the paper about you and Nick." I was tripping and stumbling over my words.

But Jared interrupted. "Save it, okay? You're here now—get your story and go."

"Jared." I stood up, too antsy to sit still. "I want you to hear me. Look at me. I talked to my mom, and she says she agrees there is no way we would ever run a story about this."

"I said just save it, Ginny." He began to pace.

Finally he stalked over until he was right in front of me. "It's not only that you broke through and figured it all out—it was that you knew last night. Seems to me you just wanted to soften me up so I would tell you all about it."



"No, no." Oh, my God, he thought that? "That wasn't it at all. I like you. I care about you—"

"Then how could you spend a night with me and not say anything?"

"Because I was afraid of this—this, exactly what we're going through right this minute. You closing me out and shoving me away. Getting the wrong idea."

"I can't trust you. You should have told me you thought you had figured something out."

"I couldn't. I mean I wanted to ask you why you never told Nick. What are you still so afraid of? Please, I just wanna be there for you, that's all."

"Do your questions ever stop? My God, you're incessant. I can't deal with this right now. I gotta focus on the game. The guys will be back in here in a minute. Just get your interview and go." He turned and walked down the dingy hallway to his cramped office.

\* \* \*

Nick was great as usual, but he said something to me that made me curious. We talked and he gave me a couple of great quotes, then he said he wanted to call me and asked if he could later after the game. I was surprised, but told him absolutely—anything he needed. I thought about this request as I watched Nick catch touchdown after touchdown. He was really something to watch. So was Jared. He paced the sidelines up and down, clapping and shouting and slapping players asses as they ran to the sidelines for Gatorade. Even after this morning and our confrontation before the game, I was still falling for him, but there was nothing I could do about it now. But I literally loved watching him do his thing.

I met with Georgie and sent her to the end zone to get shots of Nick receiving for the TDs.

"Okay, get down there and watch number fifteen," I ordered.

It occurred to me as I said the number out loud that fifteen had been Jared's number when he was at Alabama. That couldn't have been accidental.

Georgie arrived under the goalpost just before halftime and got ready, camera in hand. She was standing just next to the band when the horn sounded for half-time and onto the field the band ran, taking Georgie right along with them, her heels spiking into the ground as she was forced to run or be trampled.

It was a nightmare—my insane sister out on the field with the high-school band. She had been a majorette in her years at Cottonwood Cove High School. I looked up and couldn't believe what I was seeing! She had run to the sidelines and set her prized camera down on the bench as someone threw her a baton. Georgie actually started twirling and marching, waving and smiling, her tousled brown mop bouncing in the breezy night air.

Fans in the stands stood and clapped as she just rolled with it. I couldn't help but laugh at her. Just then my cell rang in my pocket. I recognized the Tennessee area code. On a Friday night in Cottonwood Cove, everybody in



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town was here—who would be calling me now?



# Chapter Nineteen

“Hello?”

“Ginny Bruce, please,” the voice said.

They didn’t use my real last name so it must be something to do with my old job at CNN. Instantly I felt a kick in my stomach. I thought it might be something to do with the lawsuit and wanted to hang up or fake a bad connection. My curiosity got the better of me, as usual.

“Yes, this is she.” I could barely hear over the brass section of the band, blaring their horns playing snippets from *Les Misérables*.

“This is Mark Jessup, WSMV in Nashville. I’ve just reviewed your reel and I was wondering if you were still looking for a job.”

Oh, my gosh. I was stunned. In shock. Didn’t this guy know I had just been fired?

“Yes,” I said, not even thinking. My career had, for so long, been first—and now, even though I cared for Jared, he was giving me no reason to stay.

“Great, I’d like to set up an interview up here next week if you’re free.”

“Sure, I’m covering a football game right now...”

“Yeah, I can tell. The old Friday Night Lights beat.”

“Would you mind calling me back and leaving a message so I can get all your info and the date you have in mind?”

“No problem,” I think I heard him say.

I thanked him and hung up. I was suddenly giddy, but I felt a pang in the pit of my stomach. For some reason I wasn’t sure I really wanted to go. But if Jared were gonna try to block me from covering future games, I figured the best I could do was try to help the paper and get outta town. I had no idea just *what* Jared might actually do. Besides Nashville wasn’t too far, and it would get me back out there.

The game ended with Nick catching the winning touchdown. It had been a close game. The other team had a talented quarterback. I walked back to my

car, Georgie handing over her camera and her newly acquired baton to me as she decided to leave with her boyfriend, whom she'd seen in the stands. I sat in my car listening to the voicemail from Tennessee. I was excited but unsure. Maybe the guy in Nashville didn't know I was fired and CNN was in a legal battle because of me. Hell—no chance of that. Everybody knew that. It had been all over the trades. Which made it all the more enticing that he would still even consider me. Just then my cell rang. It was Nick.

"Hi, Miss Hunnicutt. Like the game?"

"I certainly did. I've almost lost my voice from all the cheering I did."

"Well, I won't keep you. I just wanted to tell you some news. Remember how I told you I never knew who my dad was?"

"Yes," I answered. I knew all too well, what Nick had wanted deep down was to find his dad.

"I finally decided to talk to my mom. She's actually in town. I convinced her to tell me. But she's sworn me to secrecy. I know who my dad is."

Another gut punch. I felt sick. Dare I ask him? Nick was such a genuine smart kid. So real and down to earth and he was a hell of a ball-player. He had obviously inherited all of Jared's great genes. I felt that Nick should tell me if he wanted me to know, not the other way around.

"Can you tell me?" I asked. "I swear, Nick, I won't print a word of what we're saying."

"I know you won't. I trust you, Miss Hunnicutt. I could see it in your eyes that you're not the type to ever tell."

"Okay, well if you want me to know, you can tell me."

"I think I need to tell him first. I mean he may have no idea at all. My mom said she didn't ever even tell him. So he's been walking around all these years never knowing he had a son."

"So why didn't your mom tell him?"

"She said he had a football scholarship to Alabama, and she didn't want him to feel obligated. She wanted him to never know so he could pursue his dream. She was trying to do the right thing, but when you're a kid, well, I wish he had known, but I understand, I think. And he never even knew so I can't blame him at all."

There was silence. My eyes welled with tears.

"Can you believe it?" Nick's voice cracked with awe or enthusiasm. "It's my number one choice to be recruited by Alabama, and my dad went there on a football scholarship too? Isn't that amazing?"

"Amazing." *Oh, sweet Nick*, I sighed to myself. You are so full of love.

"You sound so happy, so when do you think you might say something to him? I mean is your dad here in town?"

"I can't say right now, Miss Hunnicutt. I really just need to think about it all, but I just wanted to say thanks for everything. After you left the other night I decided to ask some questions. You really helped just by looking at that old album with me and my grandmother."

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I had a brilliant idea to help him—*What if I could get the whole town behind him?* I thought. I had said I was gonna do this just to throw something out there to Jared this morning but I could really do it.

“Hey, Nick, I have a huge event tomorrow night to introduce the new column. We’re having a fundraiser at the newspaper and I’d love for you to be my guest of honor—you know, to kinda show off the column. It would be good for you too. Maybe get the town even more interested in you. Can’t hurt.”

“Oh, Miss Hunnicutt, I’d love that. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at 5 tomorrow evening. The guests will be there by 7pm, but I have to be there to help set up. Tell your grandparents to come. They can get there any time after 7pm. Okay?”

“Thanks so much! Oh, I can help too. What do I wear? I have a suit I wear to church.”

Can this kid get any better? “Perfect. Okay, this will be awesome. See you tomorrow then.”

“Great, well I better go. Hey—Go Cougars, huh?”

“Yes, sweetheart, Go Cougars!”

We hung up. I sat still in my car, full of thoughts. Maybe that was all I was supposed to do here. Maybe I was never really here for myself at all. I needed to help Nick, and I need to help the Chatterbox if I could—then I guess I’ll be headed North to Nashville. It’s really all I have ever wanted and a week ago, this would have been my dream coming true. But somehow my dream didn’t seem so important tonight. Melancholy set in as I sat in my car.

It was late and I needed to get home. We had a long day ahead with the fundraiser and party at the Chatterbox tomorrow night. I was exhausted but just didn’t feel like going home. But at this point, I knew I couldn’t satisfy what I truly wanted—to sit with Jared and at least convince him I would never hurt him—that whatever secrets he still had left were safe with me. And he definitely had some. He’d known he was Nick’s dad long before Nick found out the other day. He’d taken this job to be close to his son. Yet still hadn’t been able to tell him.

Jared must be wracked with fear and guilt, I reasoned. Yet somehow he’s been able to coach this team just steps from a regional championship. After tonight it looked like the team will get to the play-offs. I thought for a moment about this. A man under so much stress, hiding so many secrets, living alone, keeping his distance inside his fortress—protecting his heart, no wonder he felt so emotional to me last night. He’d conveyed a need and a loneliness last night, and it had felt good to be there for him; to hold him and make love to him. I’d felt as though he’d needed me.

I was lost in the sensual memory of Jared’s body, his way of caressing me and tasting me, his smell as I fell back in the crook of his neck kissing his delicious flesh—when suddenly, Knock! Knock! Knock! Jared was tapping on my car window.





# Chapter Twenty

“Hey, gotta minute?” Jared wanted to get in.

I motioned to him to hop inside just as it started to sprinkle. Jared got in and slid the seat back to allow for that long gorgeous frame. His thick dark hair glittered with tiny raindrops.

“Whatcha still doin’ here?”

“Oh, uhm.” I felt my whole body heat, and I inhaled his scent. “Just going over my notes before I go home,” I stammered, so thrilled to be this close to him again and to see that he no longer looked furious.

Maybe Georgie had been right and his response had been knee-jerk. Please let her be right.

“Well, I just wanted to say thank you.”

“For what?”

“Nick told me how nice you were. He just thinks you’re pretty great, that’s all.” He paused in an awkward silence. “And uhm, so anyway, I just wanted to say thanks. You could have really cornered him with everything you know, but you stuck to your word and made it all about his talent on the field.”

“I want my column to help Nick make those dreams of his come true. I would do anything to help that kid—he is really special. He just called me to thank me for interviewing him too. He’s been raised well by those grandparents of his.”

“Yeah, they’re great people.”

“Jared...” I began but he interrupted me.

“I, uhm, I...I need to say something before I go.” He pulled in a deep breath. “I need to apologize. I’m really sorry for the way I acted—for the things I said.”

He couldn’t seem to manage any more. He stopped and stared straight ahead, the rain growing heavier slashing at the windshield.

“Thanks,” I managed. “I understand.”

There was an awkward silence that followed. I wanted to touch him, to kiss him, to tell him to stop me from moving to Nashville. I reached over and stroked his arm. He glanced over, looking at me with those fabulous blue eyes, his left dimple appearing as he offered a small consolation smile.

"Well, that's really all I came to say," he muttered. "I need to get on home, the rain's supposed to get bad." He reached for the door.

I wanted him to stay. I wanted to tell him I would take this job in Nashville unless he wanted me not to. I decided to jump in and just throw it out there. But he spoke again.

"Ginny, you might as well know what happened. I mean you're in this deep and the truth is the secret will slip out on its own the second Nick knows."

"Jared, this is no longer my story to tell. You can tell me only because you want to. It won't go any further than right here." I reached over and laid my hand over his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

He gazed at me and began.

"Marti and I were high school sweethearts. Our senior year she evidently was pregnant with Nick. We graduated when she was barely two months along. Not even showing. I got a scholarship to Alabama and she never wrote to me and quit answering my calls. Her parents told me she had a new boyfriend so I left her alone.

"Fast forward seventeen years and I get a call from her this summer. I was let go by New England and looking for my next move. I was so shocked and surprised to hear from her. She said she got the number from Jill after she tracked everybody down. I literally just found out about Nick this summer. I never knew I even had a son until then. I found this job opening and it was too good to be true so I grabbed it. I told them to not even pay me, just to donate the money to the school football stadium when they revamp it next year. I just wanted to be near Nick."

"But why didn't you tell him?"

"This kid is sitting on the hugest ride of his life. I plan to tell him in November when the season ends. I would never want to mess up his chances. He lives for this and it's not fair of me to take that away from him. None of this is his fault. I have to protect him—just for another month."

"Like Marti protected you—by not telling you?"

"I know, but it's been seventeen years, and he doesn't deserve to find out like that. He may not react well, and I would be messing up everything he's been dreaming of and working for. I've been sending money to Marti's parents since I found out. They know there's a dad now, just not that it's me. Marti knows I'm here, and when you saw her that day in the diner and I went to the bathroom, I just was worried she'd come over and say hi and that would lead you to more questions—not that it didn't anyway. You're a helluva relentless reporter."

I sat back in my seat trying to wrap my head around everything. I knew it all in my heart but hearing Jared come clean and explaining it all was such a

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relief. He was trusting me and that felt so good. I felt I was inside him now. Suddenly I realized it was just where I wanted to be. The moment drew us closer. It all made sense and he was as special as I thought he was. But I was wondering one more thing.

"Why now? Why is Marti okay with all of this now?"

"She's sick. Being tested for cancer. She wants to make sure everything, all the secrets, are out there just in case."

"Oh wow," I said. "I'm so sorry, Jared."

"It's okay. Better late than never—if she possibly died with this secret, that would be the real tragedy. But Nick will know. In less than a month, he will know I'm here."

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. I had to tell him about Nashville and the job interview. I wanted to see where he stood now.

"I wanted you to know, I'll probably be leaving town," I said, still squeezing his hand.

"Oh, why?"

"Well, I had a call from a Nashville TV station and they wanna talk next week."

"Well, there you go. I know you wanted to get back to your real career; TV."

"Yeah, I'm excited."

"Well, then, I'm excited for you."

So exasperating. Why wouldn't he even give me a hint that he wanted me to stay? Maybe he didn't. Maybe he just wanted to focus on Nick now.

"Thanks," I said. "I just wanna make sure Mama and the newspaper will be okay before I go."

"Don't you have that fundraiser thing tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, me and my sisters are doing it—well mostly my older sister. She's a party planner and she has invited lots of old people with money. I sure hope it works. The paper's been in my family for three generations. I've asked Nick to come so the guests can meet the guy behind the story. I am making him *my* guest of honor."

"Well that's great. What time is it?"

"It's at seven o'clock. You're welcome to come."

"Okay, I'll see. I'm happy for you, Ginny. You deserve to go for your dream and get back out there. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, well, g'night."

I was now convinced he wasn't interested in keeping me here. For whatever reason, last night seemed to have vaporized for him. But for me, I was hooked. He wasn't just another gorgeous man. He'd found his way inside my heart. How could I go and just forget him—I couldn't even forget last night. But living here in Cottonwood Cove with us dancing around each other sounded like pure misery for me, especially if he wasn't going to be mine—if I wasn't going to be his. Jared was the kind of man I just couldn't

shake. I wanted him fully now and I knew if he didn't want me, I would have to go. I couldn't live around him like that.

I crawled into bed late. It was after midnight when I finally got home. I was sure Mama would already be in bed, but I was wrong. She was sitting in her old tattered pink robe under the single light on in the house. A dim floor lamp in the front room illuminated her in a buttery glow as she read a copy of People Magazine. I knew she must be nervous and not able to sleep with the whole fundraiser thing going on.

"What are you doing up?" I asked her, plopping down on the old floral couch.

"I could ask the same, that game was over hours ago."

"You're not waiting up on me are you?"

"Well, I know you didn't sleep here last night. But that's beside the point—you'll always be my baby and I'm gonna worry." She grinned and reached over and patted my knee. "What's that look, Virginia? I know that look. What happened?"

I told her everything about Nick and Jared but then the news I knew would really get to her, the phone call from Nashville.

"Oh, baby, that is great news. You need to go do what you do, Sweetheart. I don't need to be standin' in your way either."

"But Mama, you're not. It's just—it's just, I don't know—I've kinda liked being back home."

"I think you *kinda* like the coach." She smirked and winked at me. "I know you too well and you'll 'bout near follow your heart anywhere. You were always the soft one, Ginny. Carolina was more rigid and held her heart too close. Carolina protects her heart, you follow yours."

"What about Georgie?"

"Honey, she don't follow heart, she follows tail." She laughed at herself, leaning forward and patting my leg again. "You know, she's always after the hunk, and some fun. Y'all are all nothing alike."

"Jared doesn't seem too interested anymore. I told him about Nashville and moving there tonight, and he basically told me, Good luck. I like being here for a lot of reasons though too, Mama. I love being able to work with you on this silly little paper. I never thought I would take it seriously, but I do. I see now what it has meant to you all these years. And I love seeing Carolina and Georgia too and I don't know, just being here, the dock, the lake, the gazebo, the diner. It all has just felt good."

"But, Ginny, I don't want you hiding out here. You're so much more than all this. You belong on TV. You always have."

"I know—I do still have big dreams, it's just that all that time I was in Atlanta at CNN, it looked so glamorous—but Mama, I was so lonely."

She sat quietly taking all that in. Mama wasn't really a stage mother with me but she wanted me to reach higher, reach farther—reach my potential. She was the motivator, and the one who constantly encouraged my big dreams. I



knew she wasn't ready to see me give up. But in the few weeks I had been home I had learned so much about life—and the life I wanted. And so much of that was all right here in Cottonwood Cove. A metamorphosis had swirled inside and suddenly, somehow, all that glitter and glamor on network news and the big city didn't have the allure it had just months ago.

"Mama, something has changed me here, and even if I do wind up going to Nashville, I can never go back to the other me. I love it here."

"Baby, I think what you love might be Jared. When we fall in love, somehow the world looks different through the eyes of a lover. Needs and dreams seem to melt into something we never saw before; something we never felt before. And though you think you loved before, you may not have ever experienced the real grown-up love you look like you're feeling to me."

"Oh, Mama, how can I be in love—I just met the guy a week ago! This is crazy."

"I knew the second I laid eyes on your daddy, and by the end of the first week, we were going steady; then by the end of the third week he popped the question. The heart always knows when it's right, Ginny. And remember, you are the one who knows how to follow her heart."

"Oh, Mama, I need to go on to Nashville. This all makes no sense."

"Sleep on it—only you will know what makes sense in your life. Then, only you can decide what you need to do. You'll know. I promise." She smiled and pulled herself out of the chair and kissed my forehead, turning to make her way to the bedroom. Her robe almost too small for her round body; she looked older than her nearly sixty years and moved stiffly through the kitchen ambling to her bed. I loved that woman. She was getting older faster than I had realized.

I stayed up late and wrote my new column. Georgie had emailed me some pictures; some of them she sent accidentally, I was sure, since they included the tight ass of her cute boyfriend. I knew the story was going to print at 2AM, so I just got it in under deadline. It would hit the newsstands tomorrow morning. It looked great and the shot Georgie got of Nick defying gravity, catching the winning touchdown was priceless.

I went to my bed but couldn't sleep. My mind overflowed, and I thrashed under my covers throughout the night. The full moon streamed through my window creating shadows on my wall, and they danced and darted through the tree limbs. I finally drifted off, then in and out of slumber as the minutes toward morning ticked by in slow motion.



# Chapter Twenty One

Nick and I arrived at the fundraiser around 5:15, dressed to the hilt and ready to do our thing. Carrie and Georgie were there setting up. I have to say, Carrie had totally outdone herself. Hors d'oeuvres were scattered about: shrimp, crab puffs, pastries; it was so elegant and upscale. There was a huge punch bowl with a pink champagne concoction.

Nick was adorable in his navy suit. It looked a tad too big, and it reminded me he was only seventeen, but his heart was much older.

Georgie and Carrie were moving chairs around when Nick jumped in to help.

"Let me take those, I can get it," he offered.

"Oh, great, thanks so much," Georgie said handing him a couple of folding chairs.

"Oh." She held a hand to her ear. "I think I lost an earring. I hope it's not in the punch bowl."

She searched down her ample cleavage. "Oh, thank heavens! Here it is, down in my bra." Georgie laughed.

"Oh, thank God." I smirked. "So glad it's not in the punch—'cause nothing says fundraiser like a sudden tracheotomy."

"These old people are picky, so everything has to be just so. Go wash your hands so all that sticky won't be on everything," Carrie ordered with a smile.

Nick headed off to the bathroom when Mama came in, Miss Belle, the office cat, following her. "Oh, y'all. This is just beautiful. Everyone is gonna have such a nice time."

"Not to mention all the cash we're gonna raise. Get ready, Mama." Georgie was her usual, perky self.

Nick returned, his suit coat removed, looking ready to work. I gave him little odd jobs carrying trays here and there to keep him busy till the guests arrived. The caterers had left the food, but it was up to us to serve it.

"Okay, sweetie, light the candles. We're fixin' to set the mood," I directed.

Carrie stood to the far back of the little newspaper office, her hands resting on her small hips. "This is perfect. I think we're finally ready."

"Carrie, it's just beautiful," Mama said softly.

I turned around and looked at the office of The Chatterbox. I was overcome. The pink gauzy tulle billowed from the ceiling like puffs of cotton candy, and the candlelight mixed with the pink to wash the room in a sherbet-colored dream. Carrie smiled. An ice sculpture cut to look like an open newspaper greeted the guests alongside the crystal punch bowl. All of us stood still. Mama teared up. She slipped her finger under the rim of her glasses and wiped the tears away.

"Wow," Nick broke the silence. "This is just awesome."

"Thank you, Nick, and I saw that you have some pretty awesome talent yourself." Carrie smiled, gesturing at the cover of the newspapers, which were scattered about for decoration.

"Aw, well, I guess so," he said looking down—modest as ever.

"Here come the first of the guests! Quick, everyone take your places," Carrie ordered.

"Oh, no! Where's my place?" Nick asked sliding in his new dress shoes.

I laughed. "Oh, sweetheart, you don't have a spot—you're the guest of honor."

Mama and Miss Belle made their way down the hall to an office where Carrie was keeping the party goods. The hors d'oeuvres and other goodies were all stored back there. Mama came back without her cat. "Where's Belle?" I asked her.

"Oh, I put her to bed, she'll be fine. She's old."

"Speaking of old, here comes Mr. Morrison. Lord, he looks halfway to heaven," Georgie whispered.

"Hello, Mr. Morrison, so good to have you here. Thank you for coming," I said as I positioned myself near the door as a greeter. The rest of the old guests began to file in. Carrie was standing on the other side of the food table greeting the country club crowd.

"Do you see that obnoxious old lecher over there?" Georgie joined me as we both joined Carrie.

"Honey, you're gonna have to be a hell of a lot more specific—this whole crowd looks like they got one foot in the grave."

"That one over there in the red jacket." Georgie bobbed her head in the direction of Mr. Morrison. "I'm this close to slapping him. He just pinched my ass."

"Wait! Wait, that man is the president of the country club. We need his donation."

"Well I don't care if he's Santa Claus, that hurt."

"Oh my Lord, Georgie, you're so dramatic. He's eighty at least—and arthritic!"

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Georgie leaned over and pinched Carrie.

“Ow!”

“See? It hurts doesn’t it?”

“Stop it, you two,” I stepped in. “Hey, here’s an idea—Georgie, maybe if you flashed him a boob he’d up and give us *all* his money.”

“Yeah, we could sell pinches and save the paper!” Carrie smiled sarcastically as she walked off to keep greeting people. It was starting to look more like a wake than a fundraiser. I saw Nick milling around eating some of the treats. He had a Mountain Dew in his hand since he couldn’t drink the champagne.

I walked up the hall to the office to grab some more of the fabulous finger food Carrie had stored for the caterers when I got a shock.

“Oh, no! Miss Belle is dead,” I screeched. “Poor Mama. Oh, dear God, how did this happen?”

Georgie overheard me and showed up in the doorway. The cat was on her back, feet in the air, with her eyes still and open. Half the shrimp hors d’oeuvres were gone. Georgie had put them up high and on the ice that the caterers had left for us.

“Oh, no,” I said sadly. “She must have eaten the shrimp!”

“You mean the ones I just served Carrie’s guests?”

“What’s all the commotion?” Carrie arrived in the doorway. “Oh, my God! What happened?”

“Miss Belle ate the shrimp and now she’s dead. The shrimp may be contaminated. We gotta get the shrimp outta the main room.”

“Oh shit! I’m fixin’ to have a Jim Jones situation here, like they all drank the Kool-Aid—they all ate the shrimp. Ginny, go get that shrimp plate outta there!”

I ran back up the little narrow hallway and back out into the main newsroom.

“Nick, help me quick! Grab those shrimp plates and come with me.”

I ran over to Faye Marbury and grabbed a shrimp right out of her mouth. “Scuse me, ma’am, I forgot the dip, let me get you a fresh one.”

“What the hell, I was fixin’ to bite into that!” Faye shrieked.

“What are y’all runnin’ ‘round here like a house afire for?” Mama asked. I certainly did not want her to see her cat, all four paws in the air.

“Oh, nothin’, Mama, we’re fixin’ to serve some more food. Keep entertaining the guests.”

“Alrighty, I think it’s going well; Mr. Morrison wants to offer some big help. And that boyfriend of Georgie’s is out there now with his parents. I hope they brought us a bucket of cash! Mr. Morrison said he just loves Georgie too. Tell her to get back out here and talk to him.” She smiled and meandered back to the party.

Nick and I ran into the back room where Miss Belle was still lying dead in the middle of the room, her mouth wide open.



"Oh no! That's so sad. What happened?" Nick asked as he dumped the trays of shrimp into the garbage bins.

"Miss Belle ate some shrimp and it must have killed her."

"Oh God! I ate some too!" Nick ran down the hall to the bathroom. I heard him coughing trying to make himself throw up.

"We need to move her in case someone comes in here," Carrie said.

Georgie volunteered and picked up the cat to move her when suddenly the loose earring fell out of her mouth and dropped to the floor.

"Oh God, Look at that! She must have swallowed my earring, that's what killed her—not the shrimp!"

"Oh, that means we don't have to destroy the hors d'oeuvres." Carrie looked over to me at the garbage can. "Ginny, stop! Are there any left?"

I brought up the plate with one tiny shrimp on it clinging for dear life. "Yes! We're in luck. This rogue little shrimp has survived. Now all I need is a very sharp knife and twenty-five toothpicks!" I was being sarcastic but inside I was reeling! What were we gonna do now?

"Ugh!! My perfect party is ruined! How could all this idiocy happen?" Carrie was livid.

"It's okay, we have so much other food out there they'll never even notice. We better get back out there now," Georgie said. Just then, Mama showed up at the door. Georgie dropped the cat onto a pile of old blankets in the corner when we heard a loud meow. The earring had evidently dropped her into some sort of mini coma and falling into the blanket woke her right back up. The cat scampered out and into the party, only to run and hide under a table.

"What are y'all doin' to Miss Belle? Now get on out here and let's make us some money."

We all headed back into the party. I explained to Nick that he wasn't fixin' to die as the music played and everyone was eating and chatting, and donations were coming in like crazy. Mama took her place over near the money table and gave me the thumbs up. It was the perfect time to introduce Nick.

"You ready?" I asked him, smiling.

"As I ever will be," he answered.

"This is gonna help you so much. I want all these rich townsfolk behind you."

"I'm ready." He looked at me, grinning.

I took Nick and slipped my arm in his and walked him up to the back of the room.

"May I have your attention?" I dinged a fork on a stray champagne glass. I looked up and saw the glass door to the sidewalk open and in perfect time, Jared walked in.

# Chapter

## Twenty Two

I choked but only for a second, as my reporter-self took over. “This fine young athlete is our first star of a new column, designed to help increase interest in this historical paper, *The Chatterbox*. It’s been Cottonwood Cove’s only newspaper for over seventy-five years started by my grandfather, Jackson Bruce. I’d like you all to give a huge round of applause and show your appreciation to Cottonwood Cove High School’s very own, champion wide receiver, Nick Love.”

Everyone broke out in applause. Nick moved forward and waved to everyone. I saw Jared near the door clapping proudly.

“Thank y’all so much. I appreciate it. I’d like to thank the newspaper for doing the story on me. Miss Hunnicutt is really great. I sure hope I make y’all proud.” He stepped back with a wave and stood still next to me. The room broke out in more applause. All of the family was there—all my aunts watching as we all crossed our fingers that our precious legacy would survive. Nick’s grandparents stood to the side of the room, smiling and clapping for their pride and joy. The crowd began to gather around Nick as I slipped over to the side of the room.

Just then I saw a woman standing over to the left of the room. She darted behind old Mr. Morrison. But I caught the sandy-blond hair. It was Marti, Nick’s mom. My heart squeezed my throat. She caught Nick’s eye and I saw her blow him a kiss. She didn’t seem to want any attention. The applause became more silent, as I watched everyone in the room head towards Nick to shake his hand. Jared and Marti headed outside as Nick was surrounded by people.

I felt sick to my stomach. Everything in me told me to go peek through the door and listen, but my body wouldn’t budge. I stood frozen.

Georgie popped up behind me. “That was great. Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Jared’s here.

"Good. Go get him."

"He's with his ex, Nick's mom. They went outside."

"So? I'd still go get him—you still have legs. Walk outside and get him away from her. C'mon, do you love him?"

"I don't know," I answered. I began to get teary-eyed.

"Well, only you can find that out. Now go."

I knew she was right. I headed to the front door as I overheard Jared and Marti in a heated conversation.

"I just wish I had known, you know? This wasn't good for any of us. I missed a lifetime with him. I'll never get that back. You didn't even give me a choice in the matter. Totally unfair. It was totally unfair to everyone. But especially to Nick." Jared was upset.

"Jared, I'm sorry. I've told you what I did it for and we can't get time back. It's done," Marti said, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"Okay, I'll see you later. I wanna get back in there with him," Jared said.

"I'm gonna go. I'm a little tired tonight. Please forgive me." She looked at him weakly.

"It's okay, Marti. Get some rest. You're right. I was livid for a long time this summer, and I will always hate the decision you made, but what's done is done. I'm just so glad you finally told me. I am really grateful for that."

Marti smiled and touched his cheek, as she turned and walked up the sidewalk towards her car.

Jared was coming inside the newspaper office doors. I acted like I was just leaving.

"Oh, you leaving?" he asked as he opened the door.

"Uh, no. Just uhm—coming out for a breath of fresh air."

"Oh—okay if I join you?"

"Sure," I said, a little nervous but still happy he would talk to me.

We both walked outside. I glanced over my shoulder and I saw Mama fold her hands and smile at me. Jared and I walked up to the corner and crossed the street over to the gazebo at the park and sat down inside. The air was damp and cool, the night sky providing a canopy of stars for us to sit under. It was magical, but my heart was thumping a mile a minute. I looked deeply at him. His rugged angular face, tanned skin and sexy body were only the backdrop now. I could see the man in full. No shroud of secrecy anymore.

Simply, I knew Jared was good. One of those rare good souls you only come across once in a lifetime. I had fallen without my even realizing it. My heart had gone and done its own thing without my permission. And I might never know if he felt the same way.

"So how are you tonight?" He started awkwardly.

"Good, things are going well in there. Looks like Nick's in his element. He is really quite something."

"I wish I'd had something to do with that." He looked down at his shoes.

"Well you did. He's gorgeous and sensitive and caring. And he is certainly

talented on that field. That's all you."

"You're sweet, but I would trade all my success in the pros to have known he was in the world." Jared looked across the gazebo at me. I could see in his eyes a level of trust that hadn't been there before. I think he knew I wasn't out to get him. No more reporter.

"Where did Marti go after she had the baby?" I asked. I wanted to know what he knew.

"She let her mom and dad have Nick when he was a baby. Her plan was to run out to Hollywood and become famous, make millions and come back and get Nick. But things didn't go so well. She never really got any work to speak of and now she's being tested for cancer. It's really sad. But Marlene, her mom, thought Marti had been wrong to hide Nick from me. I mean, I know why she did it, and I appreciate her trying to protect me, but I would have given up all of it for all those years I missed raising my son. Love is all there is, and I missed a lot of years giving my love to Nick. He deserved better than that. If I could do it all again, I'd seriously give up every second to be part of my son's life all those years."

Tears escaped my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Jared. Don't you wanna tell Nick? He needs to know." I wanted to say something but it wasn't my place. Nick had asked me to keep quiet. This was between them, not me.

"I will but I'll wait till we get past the championship game. He's got a real shot to be a pick for Alabama and I don't wanna mess with his mind right now."

I heaved in a deep breath. I knew I was in love with this man. I reached across to him and grabbed his hand. Jared slid over to sit next to me, his huge thighs now right where they belonged, rubbing against mine.

"I understand," I offered. "I'm here for you, you know that?"

"Yeah, but for how much longer? Aren't you headed to Nashville?"

"I'm not sure. They haven't made an offer yet. I mean I haven't even interviewed for it. They just wanna see me." I looked up at him. His face just inches from mine, I could feel his breath on me. I loved being this close to him. Nothing had ever felt so natural. This man had become part of me. He made me feel like the world could leave its orbit and dance around the universe as long as I was with him; I knew I would be safe.

"Well, are you gonna go if they do? I mean you have to—right?"

"It is my career. I mean yes, it's what I do. But I might still be needed here."

Nick leaned down and pressed his warm soft lips gently to mine. I pressed back, his lips so delicious I couldn't break free of the trance I was in whenever Jared's body was close to mine. We were kissing under the stars, and I suddenly felt as if every fantasy I had ever had was coming true, right there, in my hometown under the damp southern night sky. I felt his hands slide up my back pressing me into him. He dropped his face beneath my jaw,



tasting my neck.

Interruption. My cell jingled with a message.

"I might need to check this, it could be Mama. I *have* been gone for a while." I was breathless, my pink lipstick all over Jared's mouth. I reached up with my thumb and was cleaning it off when I read the words, "So Monday works for me. Can we expect you here around noon?" It was Mark at the Nashville TV station. I had no idea what to do. I wanted to stay. I wanted to be on TV again. But Jared's body was hot against mine—and my body had melted into his. I wasn't sure.

"What is it?"

"It's the TV station."

He looked like a boy who'd been forgotten by Santa.

"I won't stand in your way, but if you stay, I can promise, you'll never be lonely again," he said as he smiled a genuine smile at me. This was something I knew I needed to have. The real thing. So few people in life have a chance at something like this. I knew it was rare. I wanted this—this chance with Jared.

"I can't go right now," I said. "I need to stay. I'm needed here. I want to be here with you. If you want me to be."

"I do but don't stay for me."

"Didn't you just tell me love is all there is and that you would have given all the pro stuff up in a heartbeat if you had known about Nick. If you had a chance to spend all those years with him that you missed?"

"Okay, your point here is wonderful, but Nick is my son. You can't miss a chance to get back out there just because of some high school football coach."

"I can if his name is Jared McIntire. I can if I think I love him."

Jared stood there. I could see he was taken aback. Love. There it was, hanging out there like mist on a spider web. He moved closer to me, pressing his body up against mine, kissing me deeply. "So you only *think* you can love me, do you? How can I convince you?" he asked me between kisses.

"I dunno," I said, him kissing me all over my face, "but I think this might be working."

"Good, I hope so, let me know when you're fully convinced." He dropped his lips below my ear and kept kissing my skin, nibbling, sending chills up my body.

"I think it might take a while, better keep working," I teased.

Jared kept kissing, devouring me up and down my neck, licking and nuzzling me. His emotions were evident.

"I think I could love a little feisty redhead named Ginny too—but I might need a little convincing myself."

I was feeling bold and hot as hell, my body going crazy for him as I reached down and squeezed his butt in the palm of my hand. I smiled up at him. "Could this do the trick?"



## The Perfect Score

“Okay, I think I could be swayed.” He grinned as he kept loving me under the moonlight. “Ginny, I’m serious. Sit down with me a minute and listen.”

We sat down, Jared never letting go of my hands.

“Ginny, I think this could be pretty special. You’re an amazing woman with integrity like I have never seen. Every single promise you made about me after you found out and even before –you kept that promise. You have so much to give and such substance. I have never met a woman like you. You’re rare and special and soft in the center. Your heart is so big and generous. I knew after tonight when you interviewed Nick and never said a word about me—you just surprised me. Just know that you really are something. I will support anything you decide to do.”

The cell jingled again, reminding me I had a message. I heaved a sigh, looking deeply into his mesmerizing eyes. I let go of his hands and took my cell back out of my pocket. “Jared, I care for you. I do. And I think this is pretty special too. I wanna see where it can go. I wanna be with you. It’s what my heart is screaming at me under these brilliant stars –I wanna be with *you*. Nothing else matters.” I typed a note on my keypad, *Mark, hey thanks for the offer. It doesn't look like now is the best time for me to entertain your offer. But I do appreciate the interest. I'll get back in touch if anything changes.* I slipped my phone back into my pocket and leaned over to kiss him. Suddenly I felt the trajectory of my crazy unpredictable life hit a new path, like a shooting star; I could see a destination.

“Ginny Hunnicutt, I have a very important question for you,” he said.

“Okay, anything.” I smiled and nibbled on his ear.

“Will you do me the honor and go to homecoming with me?”

“You mean like with a wrist corsage and everything?”

“Of course, whadya say?”

“Let me think”...I stopped and kissed his lips soft and slow. “That would be a yes.” I smiled.

Just then my cell phone jingled again.

“God that guy is persistent,” Jared said.

I got out my phone. “It’s Mama. She needs me. Let’s get back. I can’t wait to see how much money we raised.” We walked back giggling and holding hands like high school sweethearts. Everything was in place now and it felt great. Hopefully the newspaper was headed for its own happily ever after.



# Chapter Twenty Three

I walked into the still on going party only to see Georgie now dancing with Mr. Morrison to “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now.” It looked like a prom scene. Mama was with Carrie and wiping tears from her eyes.

“Oh, no, Mama, what’s wrong?”

“We just counted the money—It’s not enough.”

Just then Nick walked up and reached out to shake Jared’s hand.

“Mama, there has to be at least enough to keep the old landlord away till we can come up with something else better.”

“Barely a month more but the landlord wanted two months advance before we could sign another lease, remember? Our lease is over on Monday and it looks like we’ll be out.” She couldn’t contain herself. She started to cry as the music blared.

“I think I can help here,” Jared broke in. “I always wanted to help something I really believed in.” And he took out his checkbook from his back pocket and wrote a check for twenty thousand dollars and dropped it on the table in front of my mother. “Football was good to me, now I can be good for someone else. I was planning on doing this anyway. This is my hometown now, too. And maybe if the paper can keep going, one little redhead might wanna stay a while.”

“Jared, are you sure? Oh, my God! I mean can you really do this?” Mama asked picking up the check.

“Yep, my pleasure. Now what’s a party without cake? Somebody show me the cake.”

Mama jumped up and wrapped her arms around Jared. “Thank you! I can’t even begin to thank you! Looky here y’all—The Chatterbox has been saved!” She waved the check over her head. All three of the staff jumped up and everyone started dancing wildly around the tiny little newsroom and singing along with the song—it was perfectly fitting for the moment. There was no stopping any of us. Nick made his way over and started dancing next to us. He was smiling and cheering with everyone. But when the song was over, he

was caught up in the moment. His enthusiasm took over. He threw his arms around Jared and whispered in his ear, "I'm so proud of you, Dad."

Jared stopped cold. He whipped his head over to me with his eyebrows raised. He must have thought I told him.

"No, Dad. I've found out all by myself. I asked Mom and she told me. I understand everything." Jared broke down and the two men hugged long and hard, both of them full of tears and heavy emotion.

"Oh, Nick, then you know why I'm here. I had to be with you but I didn't want to interrupt your life, you know? I was just waiting on the right time."

"I think this is a pretty good time," Nick said, nodding and smiling.

Jared leaned down and kissed me. "See what kind of luck you've brought me? The NFL sure has nothing on this. I'll take some Friday Night Lights over a noisy stadium any day if I can be right here with y'all."

Just then Georgie ran past us, nearly tripping in her high heels.

"Where are you headed so fast?" I asked her.

"I'm running from Mr. Morrison. He has asked me to Homecoming. He said he wants me to twirl his baton—That man is nuts."

Jared, Nick, and I hugged Mama bye and together, Jared and I drove Nick home. "I love you, Dad. We can make up for lost time. I promise. This season is gonna rock all the more."

"I love you too. I'm game for that. Anytime you're ready." Jared reached over and hugged his son. He got out and stood at the side of the car with Nick.

"I'm so sorry I missed so much of your life. I moved here to be close to you the second I found out about you. I never wanted to turn your world upside down."

"It's okay, Coach Mac, I mean Dad. You didn't know and Mom thought she was doing the right thing—whatever it is, I'm just so glad you're here now." They hugged each other long and tight.

Nick thanked me and told me goodbye, carrying twenty copies of *The Chatterbox* into his house to show his precious grandparents. Jared drove me home along the still and silent deserted old highway till we arrived back at Mama's.

"Some day, huh?" I said quietly laying my head on his shoulder.

"The best day of my life. I now have my son—and you. I finally have all I'll ever need."

The night held us still in the front seat of his vintage mustang convertible. I was in high school all over again with my date to Homecoming. I looked up at the stars for a moment. I realized, I was sitting right under my own Friday night lights, and I wouldn't trade any network TV job for even a moment of this. Happiness was right where I'd left it all those years ago. Right here in my own backyard in Cottonwood Cove.

THE END

## About the Author



**Beth Albright** is the author of the award-winning, best-selling series *The Sassy Belles*. Though Beth has had a remarkable career, from New York City to Hollywood, and all points in between, she has never forgotten where she came from... and what she loves. That's why when it came time to write, Beth had no choice but to write about Tuscaloosa and The University of Alabama, and all the quirky people she still calls family, though some do not actually share her bloodline!

After spending nearly 15 years in talk radio, as a talk show host, playing the part of a principal character on the soap opera *Days Of Our Lives*, owning her own acting school and children's theater, and raising a son who was a nationally ranked figure skater, Beth has decided to return to her roots: storytelling.

With a degree in Journalism from her beloved University of Alabama, she always remains true to her roots, born and raised in Tuscaloosa, she is a down homespun girl, although she currently lives in San Francisco with her TV producer husband and her brilliant son. But her heart is always in Alabama.





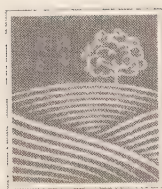
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# Southern Charms

The south is pure seduction. Moonlight and magnolias. Sweet tea and Firefly martinis and hot men with toe curling southern drawls. Live oaks draped in Spanish moss and the twinkle of a star in a southern sky. It's blessing your heart one minute and making it beat out of your chest the next. It's sweet, sticky. Hot stories about fiery women and those oh so delicious southern gentlemen.

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